THE SHORT STORY MAGAZINE

ARGOSY

OCTOBER, 1959

Price in SOUTH AFRICA
AUSTRALIA and NEW ZEALAND
TWO SHILLINGS
AND SIXPENCE

BERKELY MATHER
Tense New Adventure

ROALD DAHL

MICHAEL GILBERT

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ARGOSY

A Fleetway magazine

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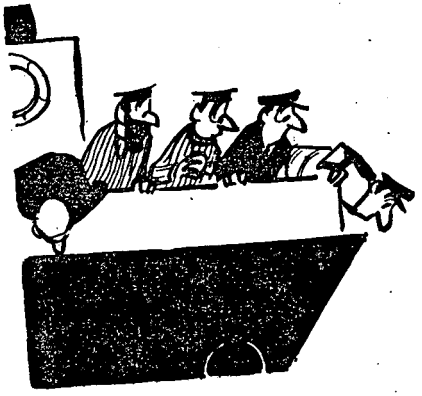

Log Book

WHILE feeding the office geranium with a pep pill for plants, we accidentally up-ended the pill packet, and were startled by a notice on its bottom which had hitherto escaped our attention.

" These pills," it said, " are a by-product of vacuum caps," or words to that effect.

Vacuum caps, we understand, are what you close jamjars with when you have ruined the original lid by obeying the instructions on it and releasing vacuum by piercing with pin. (Life is becoming so complicated that soon the only safe course will be to stay in bed.) However let us return to the pills.

We couldn't help wondering, firstly, what nutritional value to plants could reside in by-products from the material out of which vacuum caps are made—presumably rubber, metal, and vacuums?

In any case, how can you have a *by-product* of a vacuum? What could it possibly be but another vacuum? And that's not going to put any whiskers on the aspidistra.

Moreover there's something very uneasy about the thought of factories humming with undischarged vacuums waiting to be made into pills; one imagines them fenced round with Danger notices like those sinister little railed-off enclosures, generally found in the depths of the country, labelled High Tension, 250,000 volts, and presumably full of electricity lying around loose.

However as the pills proved highly efficacious we have devoted

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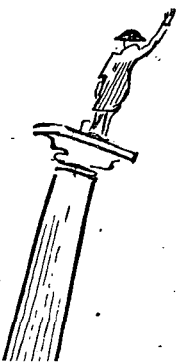


a good deal of time lately to inspecting the underneath sides of various objects not usually treated thus, in the hope of gleaning more data as to how by-products are sneaking into our daily life. Suddenly the whole structure of existence has taken on a new tilt. Is an ice-cream cornet just a by-product of a concrete garage? Is our new suit left over from electrical insulation, and the television set an offcut from someone's attempt to make artificial rain? (It often looks as if it was *trying* to rain in there.)

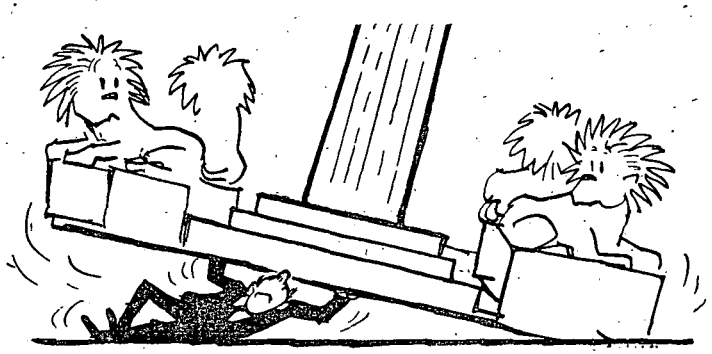
It's even more worrying to think that great works of art may have been by-products of something else. Could *King Lear* have been some odd lines left over from a pantomime Shakespeare was writing at the time, with Goneril and Regan as the ugly sisters and the fool's songs scheduled for Buttons?

Worse still—perhaps man himself is merely a by-product of the coelacanth?

However we hasten to assure readers that Argosy is not, and never will be, a by-product of anything else; the stories in it were not originally intended for Chicks' Own, nor are they T.V. plays adapted for reading. They are purely and simply stories, and written with the intention of producing first-rate fiction, at that.

Since beginning to write the above, we note that the office geranium has grown two feet. By-products are here to stay.

This month Argosy writers have thrown aside the shackles of convention and gone all gay and unexpected; **Walter Clemons,** whom readers will remember for his powerful and somewhat macabre *Logic of Blood*, and who usually prefers to dive deep



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into the terrible roots of human behaviour, has contributed a charming and lighthearted commentary on lyric love. Clemons, who was born and bred in Texas, subsequently attended two universities, Princeton and Oxford, worked as a seaman for a year and then took to literary life, first in Paris and then in London, where he reviewed for the Spectator. He is now in New York. *The Poison Tree* is a new collection of his stories.

Roald Dahl, another writer who keeps the iron fist only just tucked out of sight in the velvet glove—remember that evil little tale about the sadistic husband and the lift?—has written a story that made the staff of Argosy laugh until they were quite weak and wilted. (*Sitting Pretty* on page 67.) It proved impossible to submit to our usual checking process, but does at least show that a bird in the pram is worth two in the bush. Dahl was born in South Wales, educated at Repton, served in the R.A.F. during the war, and has published a collection of short stories, *Someone Like You*, whose American sales broke all records for such a volume (40,000 copies to date.) Although he is so widely read in the U.S.A., Argosy is one of the first British magazines to publish his stories.

Francis Fytton, journalist married to a journalist, tells us that he can only do his work at a typewriter, in a racket, with a pipe in his mouth. He is literary editor of a well known Fleet Street weekly, has written more than five hundred feature articles, and had his first novel, *The Golden Skidlid*, serialised in Scooter News. He is mad about antiques on wheels. R.A.F. leave in Eritrea provided the background for his new story.

Hugh Michael Hogan, an old friend of Argosy, is another London journalist, and writes freelance on Saturdays to provide crayon money for five avaricious daughters who sit round him waiting to use his rejected pages as drawing paper. Asked for background information on himself he gloomily said that he is the kind of man who always pays more than he need for his purchases and forgets important anniversaries.

Andrew Graham, soldier, ex-stockbroker, diplomat, and

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clubman, looks the part to a T—military moustache, receding hair, and an air of urbanity. His *A Foreign Affair* lets the cat out of many a diplomatic bag.

Argosy Award The editorial staff of Argosy are in a jubilant frame of mind just now, rubbing their hands and with smiles all over their typefaces—metaphorically speaking—at the thought of next month's issue, which they hope will prove an all-time high for interest and excitement.

Seriously, we do take pride in what we have to offer. As well as an absolute galaxy of stories by top-ranking writers, including H. E. Bates, Paul Gallico, and Geoffrey Household, there will be the start of an exceptionally stirring new serial by Mary Stewart, set among the rugged landscapes and smouldering violences of Greece in the aftermath of war.

Mary Stewart is a master hand at a tense, taut story, played out among wild scenery—remember her *Madam, Will You Talk*, or *Nine Coaches Waiting*, set in the southern fringes of the Alps? This time she has excelled herself. We prophesy that her new novel, *My Brother Michael*, will be a memorable addition to Argosy's list of winners.

As well as this impressive parade of first-class reading, the Editor of Argosy, always on the qui vive for new talent, will next month be announcing details of the new Argosy Story Award.

Watch out for next month's Argosy! JOHN SILVER

Horatio

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HOGGER BATE

I never knew him bested
but once in his life

BY HOWARD JONES

WHEN we were kids we often heard tell of the giant of Carrick River.

The story went that every three or four years, after a hard winter, the giant would stir and stretch in his sleep; and you could tell what he was at, for the waters would come a-tumbling colder and greyer and faster than before. This was the Time of the Giant, and it behove you to drive your sheep up the scrub slopes, the giant would catch 'em else. And he'd make sport with 'em, and when he'd done he'd spew 'em out, stinking and monstrous, along by Thunder Flat.

Well, the giant was tamed when they built the hydro-dam up on Saddleback. That was about the time my mam died and I was five years old. I've a hazy idea of lorries trundling and trundling along the valley road to Saddleback—but I don't recall Carrick River as anything but gentle and clear as glass, and I never saw any dead sheep down by the Flat. I believed in the giant, natheless.

My dad, Hogger Bate, saw to that.

I mind well how he would carry me down to the river, and he would hold me by the armpits, with my big boot trailing in the water. "Look ye down, look ye down!" he'd say. "Satan's a-waiting, and he'll grab ye, quick as blink your eye, if I speaks the word!"

Then he'd set me down on the bank, with his wide lips curling under the yellow beard, and his blue eyes full of hatred for me. He hated my mam for bringing me into the world, a puny boy with a game hip; he never had a gentle word for her after she was gone. I was a perpetual affront to his own magnificent manhood.

Straight as a rod he stood, all six feet of him, and with his mighty shoulders and his thatch of yellow hair he looked like a king of ancient time: proud, fierce, and strong.

Until I was old enough to make myself useful to him, he ran our little farm pretty well single-handed, and he gloried in it. Sure,

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it was a bad day if you crossed him in any sort of business. I've known him shoot another farmer's sheepdog out of spite. And once, being taunted, he stretched five men out stiff in Towby market.

I never knew him frightened but once in his life, and I never knew him bested but once in his life, as you shall hear.

Without brothers or sisters in that ramshackle old farmhouse, I was a lonely kid. My mam had taught me reading, and I read a lot in the books she left behind, poetry books especially. Hogger read nothing except his Testament.

Sunday afternoons he'd take me to Ezekiel Chapel at High Cross; and there he'd preach Sin, Hell Fire, and the Wrath to Come to me and a dozen other kids from the valley farms. There was no place in his fierce faith for pity, or compassion, or any gladsome thing.

It was a happy day for me when a schools inspector called and said I must attend the board school down the valley. I still recall the white, scrubbed forms in that little schoolhouse, the stained glass of a window above the teacher's head, the white-washed earth closet outside and round the corner: these things are as real to me as if I looked upon them only yesterday. But more real than anything else in my remembrance of those times is the figure of a long-legged, smooth-haired girl.

She was younger than I was by a year, the daughter of Jack Spenlow who farmed a twenty-acre above our place. It's hard to put into words what I felt for Letty Spenlow. She wasn't pretty, or quick in her lessons, or full of imaginings like me. But there was something about her—a tranquillity of heart and mind—that reached out to me and made me comfortable whenever she stood near.

Her calm, black eyes were never drawn to that ugly boot of mine. I never saw her angry or flustered, nor in any wise put out. I never heard her speak a bad or unkind word. Very cool, very strong, very sure of herself was Letty Spenlow.

In summer days, when holidays were on, I sometimes crept from the farmhouse down to Shepherd's Stones where, if my luck was in, Letty would be waiting. We would sit there on the river bank and talk—or rather, I would talk—about kings and wizards and good, fair maidens; and Letty would listen, her chin cupped in her hands and her eyes steady on my face.

"Do you believe in Carrick giant?" she asked me once. "Are you afeared of him?"

"Dunnaw," I said, considering.

"That means you're afeared!" said Letty. "Why, you

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shudn't be, Hoppity. This is his river, 'nd it's a good river, 'nd he's a good giant. He's a friend; don't you be afeared of him."

I never was afeared of the giant after that.

Sometimes we would play in the fishermen's dinghies on the river. That was dangerous—and exciting.

And sometimes in the hottest weather we would pull off our clothes and swim and splash in the cool Carrick waters; and climb back on to the bank, unashamed and naked as we were born, and let the sun dry us.

Often I would read aloud from the book I loved the best, *Alice in Wonderland*; and I remember now, when I came to the Mad Hatter's teaparty, Letty lay on her back with her fingers pressed into her waist and yelled with laughter.

And presently she sat up, tossing the lank, black hair from her eyes, and said, "Ah, that's comic! It's ter'ble comic, that is! I'll have my da' buy me that book, it's so comic."

"You shall have this book," I said.

"*That* un? For keeps? You tired of it?"

"No, I'm not tired of it," I answered. "But you shall have it. It was my mam's."

She took it from me without a word, flicking through the pages, and making show of examining the pictures. After a while she looked up at me, and she said, "All right. I'll take un then. I shan't forget it was your mam's."

When I was fourteen, Hogger took me away from the school. Did he ever guess, I wonder, that his hate for me was well matched by what I felt for him? God knows, he gave me cause to hate him.

One day he said I shouldn't read nothing except the Good Book, like him; and he made me gather up all my books, and douse 'em in paraffin, and put a flame to them. I blubbed at that, and it set him off in a snarl of laughter. But luck was with me that day. Hogger went off to the pens, thinking the bad work done; and I stamped out a score of books, and hid them in the shippen. He never knew about that.

Soon after I left the school, Letty went away to get better schooling down in Towby, and for five years I saw nothing of her, nor had word of her. Looking back, I often wonder how I lived through those long years. There was only me and Hogger on the farm, and we were outcasts. None in the valley wanted to do with us.

But life's a terrible strong habit, I reckon. It's as if there's a clockwork in you that ticks on, ticks on, no matter what you're suffering. So it must have been with me. I lived on, worked on, imprisoned in my tiny, green world of sheep and pigs—and hate.

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Once in a month there came to me a short release from this imprisonment. When Hogger took himself off to Towby market, I'd let the animals go hang for a while; and I'd go down to Carrick River, like I used when I was a kid, and I'd be alone for a precious hour or two, swimming naked and sunning and reading, alone with my secret thoughts. And I'd count the days and the hours to next Towby market, the time of my release.

I thought lots about Letty at such times. I tried to imagine her grown up, a woman. But I couldn't. Always I saw her like she was at school, a lanky girl with spindle legs and calm, dark eyes; or like she was lying beside me on the bank, her brown flesh wet and shimmering in summer's sun. It's queer the way some memories catch you so persistent and yet stay fixed, like carvings made in stone.

One autumn morning, when I was down by the river, I had tidings of Letty from a shepherd who was driving a flock of sheep up the valley. He told me Jack Spenlow had died three months previous, and that his widow and daughter had leased off a fifteen-acre and were working a five-acre smallholding. That set me wondering again—wondering, I mean, how Letty would prosper with a smallholding, for I knew her mam was a frail old woman, and all the hard work must be Letty's.

Next time Hogger was away, I took myself up to Spenlow's. I stood against the boundary wall a long, long whiles, looking across at the new-turned earth of the five-acre, hearing the plovers crying desolation overhead. I saw no sign of Letty.

Then, somehow, I knew she was near. I don't know how it was, but I had this certainty of her deep inside me, I felt her nearness in my blood.

And suddenly I spotted her, way down the wall and on the other side. She stood quite still, watching me, and a feeling of guilt seized me, as though she'd caught me in some mean trick.

In a moment she jumped the wall and came up.

"Hoppity!" she said.

I answered eagerly, "You know me, Letty? You didn't see my leg, but you know me?"

"I'd know *you* anywhere! Why, you're tremblin'."

"That's the walk," I said. "It's a longish walk up here."

She wore soiled black jeans, rubber boots, a blue shirt open at her throat. A woman, too—no mistaking that—a slender, straight, firm-breasted, young woman, with lips redder than nature ever painted them. Yet she was the Letty of my recollection—Letty, with her gentle eyes, her invincible tranquillity.

"I been wondering about you, Letty," I told her. "I thought I'd come and see."

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" Come inside and meet my mam," said Letty. " She's not strong like she used to be."

We sat and supped tea and talked of many a thing, while her old mam dozed in the high, wheelback chair. I forget now what we talked of. To me it didn't matter, anyway.

Being there with Letty was all that mattered. Sensing her anew with eyes and ears and heart, as if time had never passed; that's what mattered. And feeling her inside of me, so good, so calm, so strong, knowing I loved her, that I'd always loved her.

I saw a lot of Letty after that. Every Towby market day, and often between whiles when Hogger seemed likely to be kept in the fields, I'd slip away to see her. She must have known what I felt for her before I spoke of it. She must have known before that time we left her old mam dozing, and walked down to Carrick River, and I kissed her.

My heart was pounding mad for fear of what she'd say, of what she'd do. We were standing close, I put my arm about her, and I kissed her on the lips.

After a bit she pushed me from her. " Funny old Hoppity! What you do that for? "

" I love you," I said.

" You never told me," said Letty.

I dropped my eyes, and she understood.

" Never mind that leg," she said. " God gave it you. He had a reason. Now tell me again."

" I love you, Letty," I said.

" Certain sure? "

" Dear Lord," I cried, " don't disbelieve me! Don't! "

She was searching my face, my soul. " It won't be easy loving me," she said. " There's Hogger."

" Blast Hogger! I love you, Letty."

She put her hands about my neck. " That's good to hear, good to hear," she said.

After this I was so happy that it almost hurt. And I learnt a way of putting Hogger from my thoughts. Even when I faced him, when I spoke with him, he didn't count any more. A wiser man would have known this for a silly make-believe. You couldn't discount Hogger, though you might hoodwink him a hundred times.

One evening I came back late from Letty's on account of the muddied fields. And Hogger was waiting, sitting at the kitchen table with his hands upon his knees.

" Where you bin? " he asked.

" Up at Spenlow's," I said.

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" Chasin' that harlot in breeches, I'll be bound," said Hogger. " I seen her in Towby with a painted face. She's anathema to the Lord."

He passed his fingers slowly over his beard. When his hand dropped he was smiling his slow, cruel smile. I was frighted then. I was frighted as bad as when I was a kid and he dandled my feet in Carrick River.

I breathed a quick prayer, a prayer not to God but to Letty. And she heard, she came. I felt her stirring in the deep inside of me, just as if she really stood with me, with her strong hands clasped around my neck.

" Hogger," said I, " I mean to wed with Letty Spenlow."

He stood and eased back his shoulders. He didn't say nothing. He eased back his shoulders three or four times, and from beside the stove he took up a blackthorn which we used for prodding the fire. He held the stick chest high in his two hands and he walked across.

" 'Wed with Letty Spenlow, is it? "

" Yes, Hogger," I said.

" She'll carry my good name. Her brats'll carry my good name. Lord deliver me, I don't deserve it! "

Then he struck. I fell, grovelling. He struck and struck again.

" Wed with Letty Spenlow, is it? "

" Yes! " I screamed.

" That's summat I don't allow," he snarled. " Any road, she won't want you when I've done."

After a time I couldn't feel a thing except the blessed coldness of the stone floor under my cheek. All I could see was Hogger's boots, muddied boots, rocking heel and toe as his arm rose and fell. I heard him snarling, grunting, afar, far off. Then for a whiles I saw, I heard no more . . .

In the following week I went to Letty again. I waited till Hogger was abed and snoring hard before I set out into the deep night, chin down against the northerly wind. Gone two of the morning I came to Spenlow's and it seemed to me I thumped for almost eternity before Letty heard.

She came down just as she was, barefooted and in her night-dress, to let me in. I told her what had passed. She stripped off my coat and my shirt, and I heard her catch her breath at what she saw. I turned; her hands were clenched at her breast, her face twisted with a terrifying anger.

She didn't look like Letty. For quite a whiles she stood, silent, unmoving, fighting, fighting to hold her anger in. It's the only time I've ever seen her so, and I'm thankful for it.

I said, " Letty, it's all right now. It doesn't pain no more."

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Still she said nothing, but she padded round the kitchen, busy with a brew of tea. She set out the cups, and she came and sat by me, and put her hand on mine.

"Hoppity, you shan't come here again."

"I will," I said. "I must."

She shook her head.

"What is it?" I cried. "Don't you love me any more?"

"It's because I love you that you shan't come," said Letty. And she leaned forward and kissed me tenderly.

I knew what she meant, that I mustn't risk Hogger's violence over again. To me that seemed like surrender to him, and I said so. I couldn't bear the thought of not seeing her for so long, for months and months, maybe. I didn't mind the bashings, I said. I didn't mind anything so long as I could sometimes be with her.

"I allus knew Hogger was bad," said Letty. "I didn't know how bad till now. He's darkness, he's evil. But he can't beat us. Hoppity, he can't! It isn't just you and me he's violent against. He's violent against God. So how can he win?"

"I dunnaw," I replied. "It sounds all right, what you say. It sounds fine. But how shall I get along not seeing you? How shall I live?"

"I'll be thinkin' and I'll be prayin', and you shall do the like for me. That'll keep us close. It's wunnerful what prayin' does. And then one day we shall have reward. I'll come along and claim you."

"One day!" I cried. "When? When?"

"In God's good time I'll come," said Letty.

And so I had to be content.

This happened in the autumn before the great white winter. There never had been such a winter since men first brought beast and plough into our narrow valley. The snows came thick and early, and the winds spun and piled them in mighty drifts, and the freeze held them solid as rock against house and tree and hedge. For week on endless week there was whiteness all around, and silence, the overpowering silence of a living death.

That's how it seemed to me: a living death. At first I used to go down to Carrick River just to watch the movement and to hear the hiss of the risen waters. But that didn't last long. Grey platters of ice came swinging down; bigger and bigger they came, and soon the river lay strangled and silent. I was minded of the giant that I once thought lived beneath those waters; and I thought how such a cold must have frozen his blood and racked the very marrow of his bones.

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The year turned, and still we were held in the pitiless white grip. Sometimes Letty was with me in my dreams. In my waking hours I thought of her, and I prayed; and somehow I endured.

Then towards the end of January the thaw came, so gentle that at first you scarcely noticed it. Tinny little cracklings sounded in the gutters, and under the eaves droplets hung like jewels in watery, winter sun. You saw the bare branch of a tree thrusting from the snow like the arm of a smothered man. Then came the sleet, the rain, driving under doors, lacing and lashing the windows. You felt you could breathe again.

One night, in my upstairs room, I awoke, thinking I heard the rolling of a drum. As I listened, the rolling faded; I heard a screaming and a roaring like a mighty engine, and a softer lap-lap-lapping on the far side of the wall where I lay. I rose and went to the window. Water, nothing but water.

The fields were gone. The shippen and the barn were gone. You could see nothing but this great torrent of water, frothing and twisting and plunging down the valley. Only against the house was there any calm, and there the water swirled gently, lap-lap-lap below the sill.

A tree, its knobbly roots aloft, came spinning by. Then a sheep with its head just clear. And another and another. For a little my brain was numbed. I knew the great dam on Saddleback must have burst. I knew I didn't want to die like the poor sheep. I turned back to the room, tugged on my trousers. Then I went hollering into Hogger's room. It was empty. But the window was lifted and I saw his legs dandling from the guttering above.

"Give us a hand up, Hogger!" I shouted.

He must have heard, for he jerked away his legs. Then I heard him scrambling, inch by inch, up the steep pitch of the roof to the ridge. I clambered on to the sill, heaved myself over the guttering, and followed him.

We sat there, straddling the ridge and facing one another, about five yards apart. There was a half-moon flying wildly through a broken sky, and everything showed clear in the flush of milky light.

I said something to Hogger, I forget what.

He didn't speak, didn't move.

I yelled his name.

He didn't speak, didn't move.

It came to me quite suddenly that Hogger was mortal frighted.

It was wonderful to watch him, his hands gripping and his knees locked on the ridge, wonderful to see that stricken face

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staring, staring at the frenzy of the waters. And slowly the waters rose and rose, up past the windows, up to the guttering almost.

By and by Hogger edged towards me.

"Thar's a boat catched in the top of yon withy," said he, craning his face into mine. "A boat, see?"

I looked. "No good," I said. "She's bottom up."

"She's a boat. Fetch un, boy."

"She's bottom up," I said. "She's too far off, anyways."

"You can swim a bit, can't ye?"

"No," I said.

"Liar!" screamed Hogger. "You can swim, I know! Fetch the boat, fetch it!" He gave me a shove, and I went down, over the roof and into the water. I came up in the calm against the house, but I could feel the spate sucking on my legs.

Then it took a hold on me, the torrent water, dragging me out and pulling me under. I hadn't a sense of drowning but of being pressed down, crushed down, in a tomb of ice.

Once I escaped and found air, I don't know how, and I saw a tree bearing down on me, spinning in the flood. I let out a scream, thinking I was finished. Then a thick branch of the tree thrust beneath my belly, sort of half lifted me, and in its spin jerked me towards the house. My fingers clawed on a drainpipe, and my bare feet found it, too. So I clung there, water up to my neck, like a monkey on a stick.

I yelled once for Hogger, but he didn't come. I wondered to myself how long my strength would last, how long I could withstand the drag upon my legs and the dreadful cold. I laid my cheek against that old pipe, and I set my chattering teeth, and willed myself to stay there. I clung to the pipe, finger and toe, like it was part of me.

And when, every so often, a drowsiness came on me, I kept saying aloud, over and over, "Keep a hold, keep a hold, keep a hold." Presently I heard Hogger hollering away off at the far end of the roof. I lifted my cheek and saw a misted point of light, such as might be thrown by a storm lamp, bobbing and swinging on the flood.

Then, behind the light, came the dark shape of a dinghy and the line of an oar, scarcely moving but holding the dinghy straight to her course. I felt certain sure it was Letty. I knew she was come, and I yelled twice, "Letty, Letty!" with all my guts. The boat swung crazily across the flood, and I lost sight of it.

Then she spoke. She was behind me, telling her mam to take a hold on the gutter. And her arms were in the water and round my chest. She took a deep, deep breath, and she heaved with all a man's strength, and I tumbled back, sprawling in the boat.

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"You're all right, Hoppity," she said. "Here's a blanket. Wrap up warm." She was kneeling beside me, smiling a gentle smile, full of her love for me.

I sat up, gasping. "This—this is God's good time," I said.

"Maybe. Where's Hogger? I heard him hollering."

"Hogger's on the roof. Let him bide."

"We shall do what's right," said Letty.

As she spoke the smile went from her. She gave me a lingering look, wide-eyed, withdrawn: as if in those instants she had willed herself away from me, away from the boat and her frail old mam, away from everything except Hogger on the roof. She stood, her hands flat on the tiles, and stared fixedly across.

I heard her call Hogger-twice in a thin, hard voice. I heard him slithering, slithering down the roof.

I reached out a hand and gripped the pipe, holding the dinghy steady.

Hogger came down flat on his belly, feet foremost. I saw first the studs in the soles of his boots. Then his calves, then his great thick thighs. I saw Letty grasp the seat of his breeches and give a sudden deliberate push against the roof. The dinghy swung out and Hogger dropped like a plummet between wall and boat.

"Take a hold of the side of the boat," she told him. "You'll not harm there."

"Help us in!" yelled Hogger.

"Why should I help you in?"

"I can't swim, wumman!"

"That's judgment on you, Hogger Bate. It's a judgment on you that you can't swim and that you've lost every creature of your fields. It's a wunnerful judgment, Hogger."

"You can't let me drown," screamed Hogger.

"I can, easy," said Letty. "You bashed my Hoppity, didn't you? I can let you drown for that."

Hogger tugged himself up so that his chin rested on the gunwale. Letty knelt, thrusting her face close to his.

"Listen to me, Hogger. I'm going to wed with Hoppity. I'm going to wed with Hoppity. Do you get me?"

"I heard," said Hogger.

"What shall you say to it, then?"

Hogger pulled back his lips and said—nothing.

"Answer!" cried Letty. "Or, as God is my judge, you shall drown else."

A pause. Then, "I'm freezin'," gasped Hogger. "I can't keep a hold much longer."

"Answer! You'll drown else, I promise."

Continued on page 18

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"All right," said Hogger, after another long pause. "Marry him, wumman. Now help us in."

"Bide a bit," said Letty. "I know you're a wicked un, a ter'ble cheat. You shall swear solemn to it. You shall swear it on the Good Book." And turning to me, she said, "There's a bundle of things under the seat ahind you, Hoppity. The Good Book's there. Fetch it out."

I found it and passed it to her.

"Now, Hogger," said Letty, taking the Good Book in her right hand. "Swear that you'll hold nothing against me and Hoppity being wed as we determine. That you'll nohow try to prevent us. That if you break this solemn oath you're wishful that your wicked soul shall perish in the Everlasting Fire. Swear all that, Hogger. Swear it word for word."

And word for word, Hogger swore it by the Good Book.

Then we hauled him into the dinghy and found him a blanket; and we let the torrent carry us down the valley. Hogger sat in the prow seat opposite me, his elbows on his knees, and his hands covering his face. For a long while he never stirred.

Then by and by he dropped his hands and stared at me, stared hard with his lips curled and his eyes a-glitter in the old cruel way. But it didn't work any more. I stared him back.

He saw he was bested. So then he reached for the Good Book which lay on the boards between our feet, as if he sought to find some comfort in it. I snatched it from under his fingers and shoved it beneath my seat.

He wouldn't go back on a Bible oath, I knew. But I wondered —and we wonder still—what he would have done had he realised he'd sworn his solemn oath on my mam's copy of *Alice in Wonderland.*

We came back in the spring and settled at Spenlow's, Letty and me and Letty's old mam. But Hogger, he never came back.

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★ ★ ★

Adjoudication

They tell me of a distant zoo
Where a carcajou met a kincajou.
Full soon to savage blows they came
From laughing at each other's name.
The agile ajous fought till dark
And carc slew kinc and kinc slew carc,
And beside the conquered kincajou
Lay the carcass of the carcajou.

OGDEN NASH, *The Carcajou and the Kincajou*

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WHITE MAGIC

We heard nothing—and
sound carries well on the night air

BY AUBREY WILSON

JAN VAN GROOT was a big man in every way. He had not only the stature of a Goliath; he had a mind to match. In all Songura there was no better liked or respected man than van Groot. Africans and Europeans took their troubles to him and abided by his decisions. His war record gave him added prestige.

Van Groot had been a Commando and was very proud of it. After the loss of his left leg in a beach-head assault, he had been given the Military Cross.

But it was van Groot's physical attributes rather than his award for bravery that overawed them. There were few of any tribe who would not take their disputes to him rather than to the native tribunals. For one thing it cost them nothing, and for another his decisions were swift and just. Sometimes it was a smack on the head for both parties; sometimes an adjustment in the number of cattle to be handed over in a business deal; but whatever it was, his decisions were never contested.

Normally he was a happy man, with a deep laugh that rolled like thunder before the big rains fell. But now, as he sat on the verandah and listened to the maize guard telling of the previous night's depredations, he was far from happy and he could feel his temper rising.

The maize guard was an old man by African standards, and something of a witch-doctor. He was called Sowe Arap Toom, a Nandi by tribe.

As Jan van Groot heard more of the old man's rambling explanation of how the baboons had managed to steal the mealies for the tenth night running, his temper reached boiling point.

" Call yourself a Nandi," he roared at the unhappy Arap Toom, " and a warrior! You're not fit to be a washer-boy. I wouldn't trust you with my oldest shirt."

Arap Toom made patterns in the dust with the big toe of his right foot. It was a sign he was a sad and discredited man.

" The baboons are very crafty, Bwana," he wailed.

" And so are you, my wily friend," cried Jan van Groot. " Just

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as crafty as they are. It wouldn't surprise me to learn you were in league with them and shared the spoils."

These were harsh words for an old man to hear. A man who had been on the same farm for more years than he could count. But then, thought Arap Toom, perhaps not entirely unjust. Perhaps, after all, he had fallen asleep by the little fire he always built. And perhaps again, there had been the odd maize cob or two roasted and eaten—only cobs dropped by the baboons on their way home up the hill, mind; at least, mostly cobs dropped by the baboons.

Puffing clouds of smoke from his big pipe, Jan van Groot glared at the crestfallen Arap Toom.

"You have one more chance," he bellowed. "Tonight there are to be no baboons in my maize."

Arap Toom's blood ran chill as he listened to the booming voice.

Tamping the tobacco in the bull's-head pipe bowl with his thumb, Jan van Groot continued, "How you keep them out is your business. You can double the number of guards, throw chicken feathers at them, anything you like. But if there is so much as one mealie cob missing tomorrow morning, I'll skin you alive and present your hide to your Chief. I know he has as little time for scoundrels as I have.

"And don't think I don't know the reason those baboons get into my maize night after night, because I do," said Jan van Groot, pointing his pipe at the shrivelled figure in front of him. "In plain words, they wait for you to go to sleep, nice and warm by your fire. Then all is well; they know you'll give them no trouble."

Truth is indeed bitter to hear, thought Arap Toom as he drew more patterns in the dust with his toe. He knew it would be no use coming back tomorrow with a carefully-prepared excuse. The white Bwana would see through it before he had opened his mouth. Ah yes, thought Arap Toom as he summed up the situation, life can be very difficult indeed.

Slowly lifting his head he looked up at the Bwana, still puffing his pipe. But as he saw the cold blue eyes staring back at him, Arap Toom knew further explanations and excuses were useless. He must keep the baboons out of the maize or suffer the consequences.

Silently and thoughtfully, he turned on his heel and walked away, his tattered old blanket flapping in the breeze like the bedraggled feathers of a sick turkey.

Passing the shed at the back of the house, Arap Toom smelt something that to him was nauseating. But then, the odours

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concocted by the young Bwana Marius were completely alien to African nostrils. They were made by boiling coloured powders mixed with water in glass bottles over a charcoal fire. For Bwana Marius was something of a witch-doctor, too. Admittedly he didn't roll bones or cut a chicken's throat; he did weird things with his glass bottles and china bowls. But every African for miles round knew he was a witch-doctor, and his magic was powerful, too. Many times he had cured cattle doomed to die. More than once he had cured children of terrible burns caused by falling into the unguarded fires of their native huts. Yes, Bwana Marius had done these things and many more.

From the doorway, Arap Toom watched this young white practitioner of witchcraft as he stirred the evil-smelling liquid with a glass rod.

Looking up, Marius saw the bedraggled figure standing with downcast eyes. "You look sad, Arap Toom," he said, still stirring with the glass rod. "What is wrong?"

Arap Toom knew from long experience that this only son of the old Bwana was far more susceptible to a hard-luck story than his father. And when it came to telling a tale of woe and ill fortune there was no greater expert than Arap Toom.

"My life is full of sadness, Bwana Marius," he wailed. "Your father, the big Bwana, has turned against me in my old age and threatens to kill me." Arap Toom tried his utmost to make the pathos convincing.

"Why has he threatened to kill you, old friend?" smiled Marius.

Arap Toom knew by intuition this was the moment for maximum effect. Tossing the end of his blanket round his shoulders as an enraged Roman senator might toss his toga, he said, "Because I have failed."

"Ah," exclaimed Marius, nodding his head gravely. "That is indeed sad. How have you failed?"

With eyes gazing straight in front of him, Arap Toom said, "The baboons have proved more clever than I am, and have stolen the maize mealies. Every night I have mixed powerful medicines to drive them away. They have had no effect and so I have failed."

Grinning, Marius replied quietly, "And also you have slept when you should have been on guard."

For a moment Arap Toom thought his old ears must be deceiving him. Surely this young Bwana, his friend from the day of his birth twelve years ago, could not be speaking such cruel words?

But as Arap Toom looked at the young face in front of him, he

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knew his ears had not deceived him. His friend of such long standing had also turned against him.

"Then you, too, wrong me," cried Arap Toom, his brown eyes filling with tears.

"I do you no wrong, my friend," said Marius. "I just know you were asleep. If you had not been we should have heard the rattle of the stones in your tins as you shook them to frighten away the baboons. But we heard nothing. Sound carries well on the night air."

Arap Toom could feel the cold sweat as it broke out on his forehead. So this was how the big Bwana knew his story was a lie. Tonight he must find some way of fixing the tins on strings so that the night wind or the marauding buck would shake them and make them rattle.

"You were asleep, weren't you?" said Marius.

Arap Toom now knew there was no escape, there was only the truth left to tell. "Yes, I slept, Bwana Marius," he admitted in the tone of a felon found out in his wicked ways, but still hoping for mercy.

"And are you going to sleep tonight?" smiled Marius.

"No!" exclaimed Arap Toom forcefully, as though that was a most despicable suggestion. However, he took the precaution of adding, "But I am an old man and the nights are long and cold."

"Then why not give up the job and let a younger man do it?" interrupted Marius.

"Alas," said Arap Toom, a break in his voice. "I need the money to feed my children."

Marius broke into gales of laughter. "My friend," he cried, "you tell better tales every day. You, a man owning hundreds of cattle in your reserve, say you need those few shillings to feed your children! You have told me yourself that all your children are grown up. There isn't one of them as young as I am, and I shall soon be thirteen."

If it had been possible Arap Toom would have ripped out his tongue: the stupid tongue that was no longer sufficiently convincing to deceive even a young boy. He was about to burst into a torrent of self pity, but checked himself. Perhaps silence was the wisest course to adopt.

"The real reason you like that job," said Marius cruelly, "is that you can steal the maize mealies, isn't it?"

Arap Toom remained silent. He would not be tricked into answering a dreadful question like that. A lie was no use and the truth was unthinkable.

Marius read his old friend's thoughts as if they had been his

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own. "If you want to prove otherwise," said Marius, "just stay awake and keep off the baboons. Then, if there is anything missing, we shall know that the thief is someone we haven't yet heard about. Is that not so?"

"That is so, Bwana Marius," agreed Arap Toom. "But how am I to keep such crafty animals out of so large a field?"

"You could try shooting them, couldn't you?"

Marius knew it was an appalling suggestion to make to an African. He smiled as Arap Toom immediately replied, "Shooting is unthinkable, Bwana Marius. Do we not all know that baboons have the souls of men? Do they not scream like humans when they are wounded?"

"Agreed," said Marius. "What do you suggest then? Are you not a witch-doctor?"

Slowly a smile crept over Arap Toom's walnut-wrinkled face. A light of hope lit in his eyes. "Are we not old friends, Bwana Marius?" he said, still pondering. "Are we not brother witch-doctors?"

Marius laughed, and Arap Toom knew that here at last was a possible solution. "Could you not make a medicine in your glass bottles so powerful," said Arap Toom gravely, "that it would drive away the baboons for good? And then, if I slept, it would not matter."

Marius nodded slowly, considering this expert craftiness. "It would have to be very powerful medicine," he said.

Arap Toom wagged his head in agreement, his eyes now bright with expectation.

"And you would give me a fine present?" said Marius, raising an eyebrow.

The brightness immediately left Arap Toom's eyes. Although he loved a business deal it must always be to his advantage. And this one might prove the opposite, coming from such a cunning young man. "And what is it the white Bwana would desire?" asked Arap Toom anxiously.

"Your bow and arrows," replied Marius promptly. "The bow that is decorated with the copper wire you stole from the telegraph poles, and the arrows you made from that ploughshare you stole from my father last ploughing time."

This, to Arap Toom, was another severe shock. How could so young a boy, a white boy, learn of such things?

Arap Toom pondered over this harsh deal carefully. A beaded belt, or even a feathered head-dress, he would have agreed to immediately. But his fine bow and arrows! That was another question.

"Come," said Marius, hurrying up the negotiations, "you

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won't need your bow and arrows if you're not intending to shoot any baboons."

Still Arap Toom pondered.

"And think what will happen to you if those baboons get in again tonight," added Marius.

There was anguish in Arap Toom's eyes, genuine anguish, as he heard these last words. He had nothing on earth to bargain against the wrath of the big white Bwana. Nothing, not even a bow and arrows. After all, could not his younger brother make another set? Being younger he was a fool in matters of business. He would make a fine bow and just as good arrows for a mere pair of goats. There was still plenty of copper wire to steal, and somewhere no doubt there was another ploughshare.

"I will give you my bow, Bwana Marius," said Arap Toom, "and the arrows, on condition your medicine chases away those baboons for good."

Going to the door, Marius looked out at the rain clouds gathering in the far distance and thought about the fine bow and arrows he had coveted so long. "I will guarantee it," he said. "Bring your bow and arrows here tonight when the moon is up, and I will have the medicine ready. Seeing we are old friends I will come with you and show you how my magic works."

"Ah, you are indeed a true friend to an old man, Bwana Marius," fawned Arap Toom. "May your life be long and blessed—"

"Push off!" interrupted Marius. "If my father sees you here he might guess something."

Salaaming with dignity, Arap Toom gathered his tattered blanket round him once more and disappeared into the shimmering heat haze . . .

The van Groot household retired to bed early that night. But one member was far from asleep. True, he was in bed, but under the bedclothes he wore his khaki shorts and a dark red woollen shirt.

The moon crept higher into the sky and, as it peeped over the tall cyprus trees, Marius judged it time to be on his way.

Carrying his long, knee-length leather boots in one hand and a small bag containing his magic medicine in the other, with an electric pocket torch stuffed down his shirt, Marius crept out on to the verandah. Nobody challenged him, so all was well. Sitting on the grass outside he put on his boots, then slipped through the shadows towards the shed.

Squatting by the door was a dark figure huddled in a blanket, firmly clutching a bow and six arrows.

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"Ready, brother witch-doctor?" said Marius.

"Yes," came the reply.

Silently Marius took the bow and arrows and just as silently unlocked the door of the shed. Carefully he placed his new pride and joy on a shelf, then came out again and relocked the door. "Lead the way," he said to Arap Toom . . .

On the edge of the maize field there was a small fire burning in front of a roughly-constructed grass hut. In the distance Marius saw other little fires glimmering in the dark. "I see you've got your relatives out tonight to help you," he said.

"Yes, Bwana Marius," replied Arap Toom, "all of them. We have yet to prove your magic."

Squatting, Marius held the bag near the fire to keep it dry in the dewy night air.

"Which way do the baboons come?" he asked.

Pointing up the hill behind them to a clump of rocks, Arap Toom said, "Through there."

"When will they come?" said Marius.

"When the moon shines straight down on this hut and there are no shadows, then they will come. The big male leader will appear first and sit on the rocks. If all seems safe he will call and the others will follow."

"Good," replied Marius, still holding the bag near the fire. "Now go into the maize and steal three large mealies, as you have before, and bring them here."

Arap Toom shied with shock. "But Bwana Marius—" he complained.

"Do as I say," came the sharp reply. "I need them for my magic."

Shaking his head slowly, Arap Toom trotted off. White men's ways were indeed difficult to understand at times, he thought. First he had been told he would be skinned alive if any maize was stolen, now the young Bwana was ordering him to steal it.

In a few minutes he returned, carrying three succulent mealies by their tassels.

"Good," said Marius, taking the mealies and stuffing them down his shirt along with the torch.

The moon slowly crept up until it was high over the hut. Carefully, Marius scanned the rocks, but it was Arap Toom who first saw what they were looking for.

"There he is—the big leader," he said.

On the highest pinnacle sat a dark shape, looking from side to side. Eventually there was a coughing, barking noise, and more dark shapes scampered down through the rocks.

"When they get nearer," said Marius, "I am going to bark to

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attract the leader's attention. Then I shall throw these mealies to him. When he reaches out to pick them up, we both charge him. You pinion his arms while I hold his head and use my magic."

"Me hold him?" exclaimed Arap Toom, appalled at such a suggestion.

"Seize one who is the spirit of my ancestors?"

"Yes," said Marius. "Seize him even if he is your beloved grandfather. Without that leader my magic won't work."

Sadly, Arap Toom looked up towards the sky. What diabolical things he was expected to do, he thought. Then he remembered the big white Bwana with the bull's-head pipe and the cold blue eyes. Even the spirits of his ancestors could not weigh against that white monster.

There was distant chattering as the baboons made their way down the hillside. They knew they had nothing to fear, they had made the same journey many times before.

The big male showed clearly in the moonlight before Marius called to him. Marius could imitate almost any animal call.

The big male stopped and sniffed the air. Fortunately, any human scent was carried down-wind away from him.

Marius called again and the leader replied. Leaving the rest of the pack, he came forward to investigate this other brother.

As he shambled along a mealie cob fell in front of him. Reaching out, he seized it in his hairy paw. Then another fell and he seized that. Holding both firmly, he tried to make up his mind which to eat first. A little farther in front of him a third mealie fell with a dull thud. It was larger than the other two. With a yelp of joy the big baboon dropped one and grabbed this larger, more inviting cob.

Sitting back on his haunches he started to munch happily, but he had not taken many bites before something suddenly pinned his arms to his side and a steely hand gripped his neck.

Screaming and shrieking he tried to get away, but that hand never let go. Nor did those holding his arms relax.

"Right," said Marius. "This is where we use magic."

Tightening his grip on the baboon's neck with his left hand, he opened the bag of medicine with his teeth and his right hand. Smearing the contents over the baboon's head and shoulders, he rubbed it thoroughly into the coarse hair. Then he pulled out the torch and switched it on. The baboon gibbered with terror in the bright light and struggled again, but Arap Toom still had plenty of strength, despite his age.

In the distance the rest of the pack whimpered and snarled at the brilliance.

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A few minutes later Marius snapped out the torch and said to Arap Toom, " Let him go now."

A fiendish, glowing baboon cried with joy at his release and scampered off up the hillside to rejoin his pack.

But never before had they seen a ball of glowing fire racing towards them. With ear-splitting shrieks they turned and raced off as if chased by a devil.

" Ah! " said Arap Toom with satisfaction. " Such magic I have never seen. What is the secret of your fiery medicine, Bwana Marius? "

Rubbing the remains of the cadmium sulphide pigments from his hands on the damp grass, Marius looked up and smiled. " You wouldn't understand if I told you, old friend," he said.

" Will they return, Bwana Marius? " asked Arap Toom, wishing to make sure he had full value for his bow and arrows.

" It will be some days," laughed Marius, " before that baboon leader is accepted again by the rest of the pack; and by that time the rains will have come and there will be plenty of food for them in their preserves."

Slowly Arap Toom and Marius made their way down the hillside.

" Now you can sleep with safety," said Marius.

Next morning, Jan van Groot stumped on to the verandah and sat in his big creaking cane chair. In a leisurely way he lit his pipe and sat back, ready to hear the report of Arap Toom. " Well, you old rogue," he growled, " what's your latest and final excuse? "

Gathering himself to his full height, Arap Toom replied with a distinct suggestion of arrogance. " There is no reason for excuses, Bwana."

" What! " exclaimed Jan van Groot. " No maize stolen last night? Why I heard those chattering baboons with my own ears. But what I didn't hear was the rattle of your tin cans as you shook them to frighten the marauders."

With the precision of a snake, Arap Toom spat at a stone lying in the dry earth. " I used some new magic, Bwana," he said. " Far more powerful than tin cans. So powerful that those baboons will never return."

For a moment or two Jan van Groot eyed him with deep suspicion. " Can it be that for once in your long life of wrong-doing you are speaking the truth? " he said, puffing at his pipe.

" I have spoken as a witch-doctor," said Arap Toom. " They will not come back."

Slowly Jan van Groot broke into a laugh. It started at the back of his throat as a spring might start high up the mountainside.

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It descended to his stomach as it increased its momentum. Finally, it reverberated like a mighty cataract of flood water.

"Then instead of skinning you I shall reward you, faithful servant," he roared, so loudly that Marius came on to the verandah to listen to him. "What is it you desire in your old age?"

There was a cunning light in Arap Toom's eyes as he replied, "I desire a bow and arrows like Bwana Marius has."

"Oh," said Jan van Groot in surprise. Looking down at Marius, he asked, "Is that so, my boy?"

Knowing it was little use trying to deny it, Marius replied hesitantly, "Yes—yes, Father."

"Bring them here," ordered his father.

Sorrowfully, Marius went to the shed at the back of the house. He knew his father's views about dangerous weapons.

He carried them back. Strangely enough, they were not in quite the condition they had been the previous evening. Marius had had time to practise a little before breakfast. The arrow heads were badly chipped from being shot into the hardwood walls of the shed and the buck-gut string of the bow was roughened from too much ill-placing of the arrows.

"This is the bow you desire?" said Jan van Groot.

Gazing with horror at the damaged weapons, Arap Toom shook his head. "No, Bwana," he said. "I have changed my mind. Could I have two goats instead? Two female goats?"

"A fair reward," agreed Jan van Groot. "I will see to it."

Grinning broadly, Arap Toom turned and walked off in the direction of his brother's hut. Two female goats would more than pay for a new bow and arrows.

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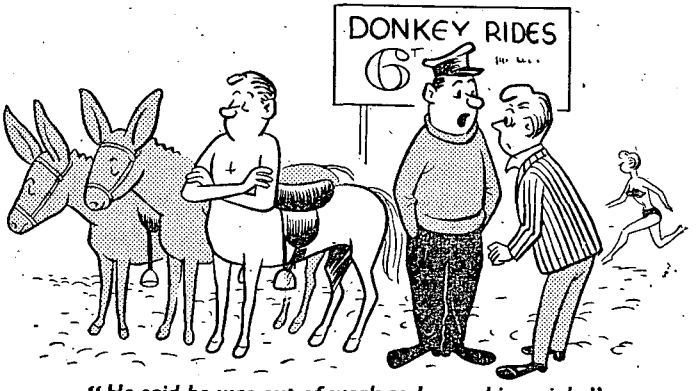

"He said he was out of work so I gave him a job."

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THE BUTCHER'S DAUGHTER

Mary went home with the paper tucked in her bosom

BY WALTER CLEMONS

THE black roots of the oak trees had buckled the pavement, and up the humps and down, over the cracks, a young couple used to go holding hands. Mary Farrell, the butcher's daughter, worked in her father's shop all day and went walking after supper with a boyfriend nobody approved of. The street was a row of hefty 1910-ish abodes with verandahs in front of long french windows.

As the young pair went by, the neighbours cocked their ears in the dusk and spied through the potted ferns, wishing the tree-frogs would quieten down so that a person could hear.

How could a girl like Mary want to go walking with a fellow who came from nobody-knew-where, did nothing that anyone could detect, and looked like something washed up on a beach? The sight of him made Farrell, the butcher, go red in the neck and puff up like a gobbler.

"And what did you do with yourself today, my man?" said Farrell one heavy evening, tired from work.

"I whistled mainly," said this young man, this Richard.

"I see," said Farrell in a restrained voice, while his blood pressure flew higher than a kite. "You whistled; I see."

"August is the best time for it," Richard went on, "when it's dusty and still. I whistled till my heart was sore, asking the air the names of feelings."

Did you ever hear of such impudence?

And in those days Mary was so pretty; that was the worst of it. Without a speck of paint her lips were red as ripe strawberries, and her eyelashes were blacker than velvet. When she walked down the street in a cotton dress it made a man's spirits rise up like bread, the sight of her fresh, white arms. Before she met her Richard she'd had a cheerful word for everybody. Now she sank into moods. No good could come of it.

At last one evening the eavesdroppers on the verandahs heard

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the two bickering as they walked, and all rejoiced to think the end was in sight.

What Richard did when he wasn't whistling was make up poems, and in the evening he would read them to Mary. She didn't know much about poetry, but she knew what she liked. She couldn't make head or tail of Richard's.

One night she listened humbly while he read out a long thing he had laboured over for a week, and at the end she said it was beautiful, by which she meant that Richard's voice sounded beautiful when he was heated. She decided it was time to put her foot down. It had been an irksome day in the butcher's shop, and the sad orange twilight made her feel mistreated.

" Richard, you don't ever say you love me in your poems."

Richard looked at her in surprise. " But of course I do. That's what I was just saying."

" When? Just now in that poem? " After a moment of shock, Mary's face subsided again into stubborn hurt. " I'm sure I didn't hear it."

" My darling, everything I write is for you. Each poem is another way of saying, ' I love Mary. To me the world is where Mary lives—an amazing place! ' "

Why, that was more like it. Mary softened and said, " If you came right out and talked like that in a poem, I'd feel better. This way, I never know."

" What did you think I was talking about? " Richard tapped the sheet of paper folded in his shirt pocket.

" I didn't know," said poor Mary. " I just like to hear you reel off things. I don't see why you can't write a poem like How-do-I-love-thee-let-me-count-the-ways."

" Slush," Richard said, with a severe frown. They walked in silence, their shoes scuffling disconsolately on the cement while the cheery tree-frogs monotonously sang *Ee-oo-whee-oo, ee-oo-whee-oo* overhead.

But Richard wasn't totally unreasonable. He loved Mary and wanted to make her happy. At her front gate he said with a penitent look, " Maybe you're right. I've been too obscure, too contorted and shy. I'll write about you, Mary. This time I'll say it all. Openly! From the heart! " Richard spread his arms wide to embrace his theme. In his eagerness to get to work he hurried away without remembering to kiss Mary good night.

The poem he brought back a few days later was what the old people on the verandahs had heard them quarrelling about. For what kind of love poem was this?

Instead of saying that Mary walked in beauty like the night

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or had a garden in her face, Richard told of his love cutting up hearts and livers in the butcher's shop and kneading a bright mound of red sausage meat with her firm white hands; he sang of how her eyelashes fluttered as she cleaved rib from sinew. And when he walked with her in the evenings, he said, she smelt of milk and garlic from supper; he spoke of clasping her solid waist and adjusting his nervous tread to that confident step of hers which seemed to touch the earth pushing up beneath the root-cracked pavement.

Mary interrupted. "Now just a minute. What was that last remark? I'm so fat I sink right through the pavement?"

"No, let me finish," said Richard. "I was trying to say—"

"I don't want to hear another word," Mary said, and two tears rolled down her cheeks. "Just what I thought. You don't love me a bit. Not once do you say right out, 'Mary, I love you.'"

He cried, "Any slick liar can say that. I try to tell how I see you. You as you are, particular ways you move, things you do that make you the one and only Mary Farrell in the world. That's what I tried to put in."

"Don't raise your voice," Mary said, for faces were blooming at the windows, and his excited voice didn't hold any charm for her just now. "You don't even think I'm beautiful."

"I do." Richard whipped his paper out. "Right here I say—"

"That I smell like garlic. I wanted to hear how I smell like roses, and be like a star that guides your way, and all; or a beautiful princess."

"I don't want a princess."

"What *I* say is you'd look for somebody to take you away from it all and make you a princess, if *you* worked behind a meat counter all day," Mary said. "Richard, my mind's made up: I can't marry you."

They reached the end of the street and stood apart under the lamp. "Do you mean that?" Richard said, all the stuffing knocked out of him.

"Yes," said Mary, as quiet as he and at least as miserable. "You don't love me."

"I've done my best. If *you* loved *me*, you'd try to understand. Would I tell you how to grind sausages?"

"You would if they didn't taste right. You only write for yourself. You don't think about what anybody wants to hear."

"All right. Let's have your recipe. Tell me what a love poem should be and I'll write it."

"A love poem," Mary said, "is a poem that says, 'I love you,' in it. Is that so difficult?"

Richard muttered against the cross stars that had fated him to

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love such a woman. Mary didn't feel like listening to that, so she started back up the pavement towards her house. But here came Richard behind her, hobbling as he dug in his trousers for a notebook.

" All right, all right," he said. " You shall have it."

He pushed her against an oak tree and moved away to scribble under the street lamp. Mary watched. His hair tumbled forward, and from beneath it he darted a morose look at her. He chewed his pencil and grunted. In a very few minutes he raised his head and glared at her. " Listen." He jabbed a finger at the evening star on the blue verge of the sky.

Mary, more fair
Than Venus above you,
Distinctly I swear
By that planet I love you.

" Is that the stuff? " Mary didn't answer, but she moved nearer.

To doggerel dutifully
Stitched like a glove you
Constrain me, pitifully
Chirping I love you.

" ' I love you,' " echoed Mary gently.

If only to say
To you, Mary, I luve you,
From pavements away
To the Highlands I'd move you.
Arrived in that green
Countryside would I shove you
Into a ravine,
Dearest heart! No, I love you!

Mary laid a hand on his arm and whispered, " Don't shout so, love," for he was growing purple in the face.

" It's almost the end," he said.

In velvet I'll glove you,
In no chasm shove you,
Then Mary, my dove, you
Must see how I LOVE YOU.

In the ensuing silence, a breeze thumbed through the oak leaves and softly fingered Mary's dark hair. She opened her eyes, bright with tears, to say, " I wanted it to go on and on."

" Unhappily, there aren't any more rhymes except ' of-you,' " Richard said.

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"Now, that's what I call a love poem," cried Mary. "Only..."

"Only?"

"Well, it was in that part where we were walking in the green countryside and you called me Dearest Heart. I could do without that ravine there."

"You need it to rhyme with the green. Anyway, some of the greenest countrysides have ravines."

"You should make all your poems sound like that one, Richard."

He was depressed. "That was a joke, darling. If I were a woman and somebody wrote an insulting squib like that to me—"

"No artist is a judge of his own work," said Mary. "I am sorry about what I said before. I will marry you, Richard. Unless—" She raised her eyes uncertainly.

His reply was to fling his arms round her right there on the pavement, with all the neighbours hanging out of their windows like so many tongues.

The lovers hurried straight home to tell Mary's father the news. Farrell, the butcher, replied briefly that he would take a meat cleaver to Richard if he ever again ventured within a mile of his daughter.

A terrible week followed. Mary wept for three days; for three days Farrell could be heard yelling and breaking things, and on the fourth day he exploded a blood vessel and died.

Mary inherited the butcher's shop and married Richard.

The neighbourhood was wounded to its very roots and cement foundations. Opinions softened slowly. Mary made Richard dress better, for one thing; and on Mary's good cooking he filled out and began to look something like other people. There was no further trouble over poems that couldn't be understood.

Richard was so happy with his pretty wife that he wrote only the kind of verses she liked to hear, and Mary circulated them proudly on their street.

Soon other wives grew discontented. "Did I tell you what Mary Farrell's Richard wrote for their first anniversary? 'My little wife, my guiding star,' it starts off. Some husbands I could mention might learn a thing or two."

Richard went to work in the butcher's shop with Mary. She taught him the business, and it wasn't many years before he was as good a butcher as the next one.

And there it would be nice to leave them, for everyone likes a happy ending. But there is a little more to tell. As the years went by, Mary's charms naturally faded, what with the children and the worries of the meat business.

Richard was very nice about cheering her up with his verses,

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but after a while he stopped writing; he explained it to Mary that most lyric poets dried up as they got older. He began to drink just a little too much, to some people's way of thinking, and he confided to one of his neighbours, Mr. Sloan, that sometimes he got fed up with the butcher's shop.

Mary never complained, though it was a sorrow to her not to have the verses she'd loved, about stars and roses, any more.

One Sunday not very long ago, Mary turned up at Mrs. Sloan's house in tears. When Mary cries she gets red in the face, and she's plump now; you can hardly see the pretty girl the whole neighbourhood was in love with.

"Now calm down, dear," said Mrs. Sloan, "and tell me what's the matter."

"Richard," said Mary, disrupted by a hiccup. "He was out all night last night. He said he'd been walking, but I found this in his trouser pocket." She shoved a crumpled paper at Mrs. Sloan, who put on her bifocals and saw that it was some sort of poem, for the words at the ends of the lines rhymed.

"Read it," Mary cried.

Mrs. Sloan frowned over it in silence, with her thin lips studiously purling. Then she looked up at Mary. "I can't make head or tail of it," she said.

Mary nodded, and fresh tears washed down her face. "That's just it. Can't you see? Richard's got another woman. I know it."

Mrs. Sloan's widened eyes searched the paper more closely for salacious phrases. The title was unrevealing enough—*For No Praise or Wages*—and all after that was darkness. "I don't see, Mary."

"He used to write poems to *me* that didn't make any sense, before we were married, and he said they were love poems. And now it's started up again. I'm sure if I could make this out, it's about love."

If there was another woman, Mrs. Sloan didn't know who it could be, in this quiet neighbourhood. It seemed pretty unlikely. She cheered Mary up with a cup of vegetable soup and advised her not to fly off the handle and say things she'd be sorry for.

Mary went home with the paper tucked in her bosom.

Now she goes through Richard's pockets every night, and she keeps finding the peculiar writings. Mary studies these poems. Maybe she tries harder now, or perhaps she has just got used to Richard after all these years, but she feels she understands more than she used to.

Some verses even seem beautiful to her, and she is convinced

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her suspicions were accurate: there is love in them somewhere.

Lines from the poems come into Mary's head as she works next to Richard behind the meat counter. She longs to ask him about them, but she is afraid they are not for her and she loves him too much to want to make a scene that might drive him away.

It seems to her Richard stares at her expectantly sometimes, as though he hopes she may say something.

But all Mary does is say the strange lines over to herself. He looks lonely, Richard. Whoever this other woman is, at least she doesn't go to as much trouble as I do, Mary thinks. I've taken good care of him, better than *she* could. He'll see how he needs me, and then he'll love me again like he used to.

And Richard, who always found it hard to say "I love you," begins to look at his wife in a way that is very odd, as if he is within an inch of telling her something but thinks he'd better wait.

Meanwhile, when he lays his trousers across the chair at night, a chair near Mary's side of the bed, the papers whisper at her from the pockets.

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"Why, you dear, foolish, headstrong boy!"

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He promised he'd buy me a fairing should please me,
And then for a kiss, oh! he vowed he would tease me,
He promised he'd bring me a bunch of blue ribbons
To tie up my bonny brown hair.

The crowd is thickest round the switchback's race,
With castanetting wheels, the blur of face,
The rushing round the bends to overtop
The heart-arresting, stomach-stealing drop:
There, organ-throned on high, the chip-faced gods
Still give their little, haughty, clockwork nods—
The hurdy-gurdy steam-pulsed music stammers
With plinking of their rounded metal hammers . . .
Those red-lipped stallions are my chosen mounts:
To saddle then, with fancied Cossack spring,
And, knees to flanks and hands to reins I cling,
While, breathless, up and down and round and round
My pure-white steed careers in full-stretch bound.

JOHN ARLOTT, *Of Period and Place*

Punch and Judy

There was cricket on the sand, and sand in the sponge cake, sand-flies in the watercress, and foolish, mulish, religious donkeys on the unwilling trot. Girls undressed in slipping tents of propriety; under invisible umbrellas, stout ladies dressed for the male and immoral sea. Little naked navvies dug canals; children with spades and no ambition built fleeting castles; wispy young men, outside bathing-huts, whistled at substantial young women and dogs who desired thrown stones more than the bones of elephants. Recalcitrant uncles huddled over luke ale in the tiger-striped marquees . . . And fathers, in the once-a-year sun, took fifty winks. Oh, think of all the fifty winks along the paper-bagged sand.

Liquorice allsorts, and Welsh hearts, were melting, and the sticks of rock, that we all sucked, were like barbers' poles made of

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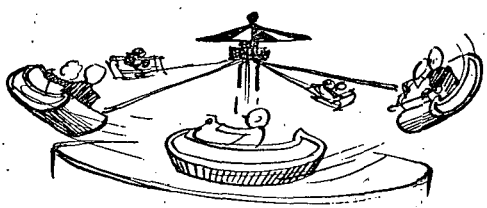
rhubarb. In the distance, surrounded by disappointed theoreticians and an ironmonger with a drum, a cross man on an orange-box shouted that holidays were wrong.

And the waves rolled in, with rubber ducks and clerks upon them . . . I remember the smell of sea and seaweed, wet flesh, wet hair, wet bathing-dresses . . . the smell of ships from the sun-dazed docks round the corner of the sand-hills.

And the noise of pummelling Punch, and Judy falling, and a clock tolling or telling no time in the tenantless town; now and again a bell from a lost tower or a train on the lines behind us clearing its throat, and always the hopeless, ravenous swearing and pleading of the gulls, donkey-bray and hawker-cry, harmonicas and toy trumpets, shouting and laughing and singing, hooting of tugs and tramps, the clip of the chair-attendant's puncher, the motor-boat coughing in the bay. DYLAN THOMAS



You've told me when, now tell me where,
That I shall meet you at Bartlemy Fair?

I'll meet you where you know I saw
The donkeys join in sweet He-Haw,
And on Fridays you so oft did draw
Your Poll on market-day.

I'll chaunt aloud that charming air,
That costermongers sing so clear,
All round my hat the green willow I'll wear,
And then you'll know 'tis me.

Nineteenth Century Ballad

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Acetylene Moon

"We're going on nicely," said Harry, as he pushed their way towards the Dragon cars. And Amanda, who seemed to herself to be floating after that arm and hand, as boneless as a scarf, felt herself answering, "Yes, we're getting on nicely."

She saw Harry balanced high on the side of the car, with one arm round the dragon's neck, and his legs derisively swinging out over the heads of the crowd. Harry, as Amanda had perceived, was one of the Kings of the Fair, a recognised king, for he was permitted to do what was forbidden to ordinary persons; to risk his life, to ride the horses sideways on the croup, the switchback standing. And seeing him on his proud throne at the dragon's neck, she felt towards him a mixture of homage and pity . . .

An hour later, perhaps two hours later, for she had lost all feeling of time, she was dancing under the trees.

"Oh, Harry," she murmured, "my feet are worn out."

"Take some more cider, my dearr, that will cure your feet."

It seemed to her that the whole world about her was swimming like a vast roundabout under an acetylene moon.

Harry's hand was once more about her breast, and now she let it stay. She had no more will for defensive action. She lay passive against the rough tweed of his coat and felt him caress her gently, heard him murmur, "My dearr, my sweetheart, my darling."

JOYCE CARY, *The Moonlight*

Roll up, roll up to our Church Fête.
Sixpence will get you through the gate.
Or if you boggle at expense,
Sneak through our fence
And crawl
Into our rummage stall . . .
Roll up, it's time you went
Into the tent and saw
The one original great niece-in-law
Of Gipsy Lee,
Who for a modest fee
(In tones that to the life
Echo our postman's wife)
Repeats embarrassingly fast
Your past.
But is particularly dumb
About what is to come . . .

Roll up your sleeve
And heave
A frenzied ball
Into the glass and china stall
In an attempt to uppercut
A coco-nut.
Roll up, or walk if you prefer;
Do not demur
About it being wet;
Try to forget as best you can
That every honest Englishman
Hates
Fêtes.

DANIEL PETTIWARD, *Truly Rural*

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HESTER RUNNING

Reckoned it were only in cities
a woman weren't safe

BY BARRY JOYNSON CORK

WHEN the policemen came out of the bedroom, Jed Lewis stood looking at them across the cottage's small kitchen. They were very much like himself. Big and capable men in their forties who could have been fishermen, too, had it not been for their eyes and the curiously unemotional way they spoke, their raincoats, the soft hands, and sensible felt hats. The man they had with them was smaller, different. The police doctor.

They asked, " How long have you been married, Mr. Lewis? "

Jed said, " A year."

The policeman, who was addressed by his companion as Sergeant, looked at Jed with blue, level eyes that were neither friendly nor hostile but simply impersonal. Making a statement, he said, " Your wife's not a local girl."

" No." Then because it seemed needed, Jed went on, " We met down here when she was on holiday. Got to courting, like."

A yellow dress she'd been wearing, that first time. Yellow dress and high-heeled shoes. A city girl. She'd laughed when he'd suggested he should take her out in his boat. He'd never asked what she was doing in Norfolk in March, like some bright-coloured bird that had migrated to the grey, cold coastline by mistake. She'd never told him and he'd never asked; but they'd spent the best part of a fortnight together, and at the end she'd married him.

Nobody came to her wedding and she never went home. She was a bad cook and he'd had to teach her how to darn, but she'd sat up all night last winter when he was ill. He could have told the sergeant that he loved her and that she loved him but he didn't know why; and there was no point in saying anything, because how could he expect a policeman to understand?

" You're a lucky man." The sergeant smiled briefly, then shook his head. " She'll not be thinking much of us down here. Reckoned it were only in cities a woman weren't safe to go out at night."

" Ay." Jed licked his lips, feeling the cold rage swelling up

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in him again and then receding because he couldn't do anything to a man who was already dead. He said slowly, " She was just going for a walk on the cliffs waiting for my boat to come in. He were one of them sex maniacs. Came at her like an animal, she said."

" He weren't local," the sergeant said. " Got a driving licence said he was Antonio Marino, from Liverpool. Some bloody wop."

" No," Jed said. " He wouldn't be no local with a name like that."

" Something to be thankful for, anyway." The policeman became unofficial quite suddenly. " The doctor here says she'll be all right, you know, mate. Bit shook up, that's all. But, for God's sake, keep her away from that beach, because she won't be lucky no second time."

Jed cleared his throat. " I'm sorry he's dead, Sergeant. So help me, I'd have killed him myself."

" Now then," the sergeant said. " None of that. It's over. Don't think about it."

Jed wondered how not to think about it. The way she'd told it, he could see it all. Clear, like as he'd been there.

Hunter and hunted reached the foot of the ragged Norfolk cliff, scrabbled for a moment in a flurry of water and pebbles, and then stood upright again on the edge of the sea-smoothed beach as the moon came out from behind a cloud.

Hester ran.

She ran harder than she had before. The brambles on the clifftop that had torn her legs like knives had offered more resistance to her than to the blind charge of the heavier man, and the mud-slippery track that led diagonally across the shallow cliff had been little better. She had been lighter and her steps surer, but the thing that followed had come down in a series of blundering rushes, sliding and falling with a maniac recklessness that for one nerve-screaming moment had brought a hand clutching at the shoulder of her loose, red dress before she had broken away.

But now, with the sand firm beneath her flat-soled canvas shoes, it was different. Up the beach, like a moth heading for nothing but the big, silver platter of the full moon, Hester ran free. And twenty-five yards behind, the man kicked himself clear of the shingle and followed. Between Hester and the lights of the distant town the beach lay still and straight in the moonlight for just under three miles.

Very briefly, Hester glanced back. The moon was shining over her shoulder, and all she could see was a shadow following

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—huge, ungainly, but desperately fast—and abruptly fear came back as she realised that the figure was nearer than it had been before. Somehow she had taken it for granted that once on firm sand he would be unable to catch her, and she found herself wondering why she had failed to sense that such a big man could run so fast.

She stumbled suddenly in unexpectedly loose sand, recovered, and swerved nearer to the sea where the last tide had left it still hard; and, as though her change of direction was a signal, the rhythm of her breathing broke suddenly, and she began to gulp air into her lungs in great gasps as the pounding footsteps behind her grew closer still.

Hester ran on.

There was a wooden breakwater ahead. She turned again towards the sea, seeking a point where it lay low in the sand. She reached it, flung herself over, feeling the crusted barnacles tearing the skin of her hands as she dropped knee-deep into a pool on the far side, struggled out on all fours. And still she ran.

Fifty yards ahead, as though she was coming to the edge of a field, she saw the glint of moonlight on barbed wire.

Hester looked up the beach towards the cliffs. If the wire was what she thought, there would be a notice, and at the same moment she saw it. A board four foot square, nailed to a post and high above the ground. At that distance and in that light the warning that the board carried could not be read, but she had seen the lettering a score of times, walking idly on the sand with her husband during the long, warm evenings the previous summer.

The writing on the board was in red and said:

DANGER!

UNEXPLODED MINES

"The bloody army," Jed had said. "Getting on for twenty years since they put them down. Likely to be another twenty before they pulls them up."

But she had known that it was only partly true. The mines had been laid all round their particular stretch of coast when the country had been expecting an invasion, and it was nobody's fault that since the war ended the shifting sands under fourteen years' tides had made the mines almost impossible to pick up. Odd detachments of soldiers were always working with detectors over the quarter-mile lonely stretch of beach; and more than once she herself had seen a red flag run up and heard the dull thump of a cordite-filled steel pancake being exploded in the heavy stillness of a summer afternoon. But it was a big minefield and clearing it would take a long time.

The barbed wire that marked the beginning of the danger area

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was only a few yards in front of her now. Without checking her stride, Hester turned even nearer to the sea. The wire was lower there because the posts supporting it had sunk into the sand.

Hester gathered herself and cleared the single, foot-high strand. Flat-footed now, breath sobbing in her throat, she carried on diagonally up the beach, swerving occasionally to avoid stones. Desperate, unstoppable, like a child in a dream running from the terror that waited in the dark.

The man followed.

Hester looked behind. She saw that the figure following her had not bothered to seek the sunken stretch of wire. Instead, he had vaulted the fence's full height with a quick, contemptuous ease, and was running straight across the minefield, taking the shortest distance between two points in order to cut her off.

Hester did not look back again. She had realised quite suddenly that she could not feel her legs any more. She could see them moving beneath her but they seemed to belong to another person; there was no feeling in them and no strength. No strength, a burning pain in her side that stabbed and dragged at her every time she drew breath—and the sound of his feet on the sand. Close now. Only a dozen yards behind.

The blast from the explosion knocked her flat.

Hester lay where the shock-wave had thrown her, her fingers clawed out ahead and her face in the sand. Gradually her memory of time and place asserted itself, and she twisted her head to look.

Her pursuer lay outstretched, too, a dozen yards away; and as she watched he moved convulsively, arching his body in a way that puzzled her while being at the same time familiar. In the moonlight it seemed to her that he was trying to bend himself over backwards, at the same time twisting his shoulders.

Someone was making a high, meaningless mewing like a great cat in pain. It was the inhuman, animal wailing that struck a chord in Hester's memory and all at once she knew where she had seen the same odd back-arching before. The coast road a week earlier.

A cat, struck by a passing car, had lain on the rain-wet tarmac for a little while before it died, mewling in the same way and arching the forepart of its body as if to reach the hindquarters that had been crushed flat by the tyre as it passed over them. It had snapped crazily at its own pulped bones and fur, and then in a few moments it had died.

Hester lay in the sand and knew that the jerking shape in the moonlight was not a man any more. Something had happened to him below his waist, where the full force of the mine had caught him. A cloud had passed over the moon and she could

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not see very clearly whether he had any legs left or not, but already he lay still, and the arching of his body had stopped. Soon the mewling stopped, too; and the only sound was that of distant shouting, the voices of men drawing nearer on the other side of the barbed wire. Men shouting, and the calm, clean, far-off sound of the sea.

Jed Lewis stood in his kitchen for a while after the police had gone away. He filled a kettle with water and put it on the gas to boil, then moved to the doorway and walked down the road to the edge of the cliff overlooking the mined beach. It looked harmless enough in daylight.

He noticed that half a dozen soldiers were working at it again. One khaki figure holding a detector went ahead, walking slowly, his arms keeping the instrument on the end of a pole swaying, a cautious antenna, from side to side. Another soldier walked behind, pausing occasionally to bend and place something on the ground.

As if to answer his unspoken thought, a voice behind him said, " They're stones."

Jed looked round. An engineer corporal had stopped on his way to the flagstaff, his hands holding something furled and red.

" Stones? "

" That's right, mate." The corporal squatted on the ground and drew contentedly at his cigarette. " Shows the path what's been cleared."

Jed frowned, searching back in his mind for another place, another year. He said, " In Italy we used to follow tapes."

" We do, too, when we got any bleedin' tapes," the corporal said. " Only what with the quarter-bloke being sick, the last indent ain't got through and we use stones instead." He blew through his nostrils. " Between you and me, stones is better. Can't blow away."

Below them, the soldier with the detector had reached some predetermined spot on the beach and turned sharp right, as though covering a square.

" Method," the corporal explained. " An' bloody necessary, I'll tell you that." He stood up and stretched his legs. " If there's a way through a minefield it's as well to know where it is, that's what I always say."

" Yes," said Jed Lewis.

The corporal with the flag shrugged his shoulders and spat. " Civvies likes lookin' at things like that. There was a girl in a red dress watchin' from here for the best part of three hours the other day. Reckon as how she could have walked across that

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bleedin' beach blindfold by the time she packed it in." He broke off to ask, " You got the time? "

" It's nigh on four," Jed Lewis said.

He got up and walked slowly home. It was quiet on the road and a wind was getting up from the sea. Could a woman make a man chase her? He decided that she probably could. Women could do all sorts of things. But why? Their cat was washing itself on the cottage wall; he stroked its ears thoughtfully.

The kettle was boiling, so he turned the gas low and went into the bedroom. Hester, lying in bed reading a woman's magazine, looked up as he entered. She smiled. " Hullo."

" Hullo," Jed said. She looked younger and if possible even lovelier, and her eyes were steady and clear. He sat on the bed and touched her hand.

" What is it, Jed? " She looked at him questioningly. " What's the matter? "

He looked down at her. She was from Liverpool. The dead man was from Liverpool, too, the policeman had said.

He said slowly, " You happy here, Hess? "

" Yes." She answered simply, showing no surprise.

It would have to be now if he was going to ask her. He looked away for a moment, seeing the new covers on the chairs, the bright, fresh orderliness of the little room, and found himself thinking about the past year. The cottage that was no longer just a roof over his head but somewhere to come home to. The long summer evenings sitting or walking together along the cliffs, the feeling of content that was like old age and yet curiously like being a boy again. Hess sewing by lamplight and her laughter. All strange and yet so rapidly familiar.

The woman in the bed said steadily, " Did you want to ask me something, Jed? "

He looked back to her, listening to the clear, hard sound of the clock ticking on the wall. Then he got up slowly, and clumsily straightened the turned-down sheet.

" No, there ain't nothing, Hess."

He turned slowly. The moment to ask was passing, would have passed for ever by the time he came back.

He said, " The kettle's boiling. I'd best make tea." He bent his head to miss the low beam above the door as he went out into the other room.

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SUPERIOR CIRCLES

Girls nowadays adore spinning wheels, but there must be four of them and a spare.

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FLANAGAN'S WAKE

I'd come just in time for trouble

BY HUGH MICHAEL HOGAN

MY Uncle Conal's twenty-stone bulk ground to a halt outside the door of the pub, and through dust-sealed lips he blew a small gale of relief. "Begob, Michael, I'm as dry as a dottle."

We went inside. It was cool and grateful after the long dusty road. My uncle ordered himself a quart pot of ale—he thought pint glasses effeminate—and said, "What's it to be, then? Tell the curate, here."

The barman put his hands on the counter. I was very conscious of the fact that I was several years under the age of alcohol, and that my father, if he could have seen me now, would have burst into flames. My uncle had assured me, however, that nobody bothered about such trifles in God's Own Country and, not wishing to make myself conspicuous by a profession of teetotalism, I asked for a beer.

We carried the drinks over to a table near the window. My uncle drained his pot and called for more. I took my first taste of beer and discovered, somewhat to my chagrin, that I did not greatly care for it.

He winked at me rheumily. "Man, Michael, there's nothin' tastes ever so bad as your first glass o' wallop. But stick at it—faith, there's few things half so good as your second."

He finished his own second quart. The curate came from behind the bar to take his glass, but he shook his head. "'Tis too much for me, Ned. 'Tis comin' straight through me carcass, I'm that hot. I'll have a malt, now."

The man brought the whisky. My Uncle Conal held it up to the light and then slowly savoured it. "Begob," he said, "Wickla' Cream, or I'm a pygmy. 'Tis as good a malt as they come, an' better, too. Fetch me the bottle, Ned."

He set the glass on the table and fished out his corn-cob pipe. Soon his brick-red face was wreathed in blue smoke. Clouds of it billowed across the ceiling. "Wickla' Cream," he repeated. "Ha, it makes me think, man." He lay back in his chair, and through half-closed eyes looked dreamily out of the window.

A shaft of sunlight streamed in, burnishing my uncle's huge

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burnishing my uncle's huge red head till it shone like new copper, making the freckles on his face and on the backs of his enormous hands stand out.

He pushed out his feet and sank down into the chair until the whole six-foot-four of him was almost horizontal.

For quite two minutes he remained silent and unmoving, then slowly he put out a hand and found the bottle. He peered at the label.

" What does it make you think of, Uncle Conal? " I said. " Is it a story? "

He pressed down the tobacco in his pipe with a finger as hard and horny as his blackthorn, and appeared to consider my question. He scratched his chin and then, lowering one shaggy red mat of eyebrow over a watery, blue eye, he turned to face me.

" Well, now, it is an' it isn't. 'Tis kind of about a young feller who wanted to marry a girl, only he was o' the runnin', as he thought. An' then 'tis maybe more of a story about meself. But ha, I doubt if it'd interest ye."

The curate stopped polishing glasses, drew himself a pint, and rested his elbows on the counter.

There was no sound at all, save for the droning of bees in the garden outside. The sunlight fell full on my uncle, and his eyes were fast closed. I feared he was falling asleep, but suddenly he sat upright. My Uncle Conal was an old fox.

" Tell us," I said, settling myself to listen.

'Twas summer, an' long ago, too—when me poor owld father was alive, God rest him. We'd been workin' for long enough on the farm, an' sez he to me one day, " Why wouldn't ye be takin' a bit of a holiday, now, Conal? "

Well, then, so I'd have a holiday. Now, if I'd had even a ha'p'orth o' sense, I'd ha' gone somewhere dacent. But to cut a long story short, I set off for Loughtrim: we had some cousins there.

'Tis on the west coast, is Loughtrim. An' as soon as I'd clapped eyes on it, I was sorry I'd ever come, for divil a thing was in it to gladden the heart.

On the one side was the wild Atlantic, rubbin' itself ceaselessly against the rocks, an' on the other damn all but bog right through to the skyline. An' the place itself—ha, a pocket handkerchief would ha' covered it! Sure, if it hadn't been that the road up from town came to a dead stop there, I'd ha' ordered the driver to keep on goin'. Man, there was *nothin'* there. And I asked meself what did they live on. And I surprised meself the day I came on the answer. 'Twas potheen—and 'twas the same for all the livin',

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breathin' souls o' them; and for your cousins into the bargain.

There was two o' them: Timsy—Timsy Flanagan, that is, he'd be your third cousin, or maybe fourth—an' his daughter, Nora, lived in a wee house like all the others in the village, an' damn little in the way o' comfort did it have to offer. But I'd come for a week, an' been fool enough to say so when I wrote. Ha, so there I was, now, stuck with them. An' by a stroke o' that peculiar kind o' luck that's dogged me all me life, I'd come just in time for the trouble.

But I'm getting ahead o' meself. Well, now, so the first person I meet is Nora, then. Ha, pretty as a picture she is, too. Jet black hair, big blue eyes, trim as a titmouse, an' as high as me heart.

She takes me inside, an' makes me some tea, an' never stops prattlin' about the way she hates Loughtrim. Oh, she'd not be stayin' there much longer.

Oh, any day now an' Danny would be askin' her to marry him. An' oh, they wouldn't live in a place like this at all, at all, but they'd be goin' up to Dublin where they'd live in the grand house, an' in the grand style. They'd keep their carriage, for sure, an' begob, they'd be eatin' strawberries an' cream every day o' their lives. Oh, everythin'd be dandy, once Danny was ready for off—an' that would be any day now. Begob, I wondered for her sanity. I was glad when Timsy got home.

Ah, he was the darlin' little man, was poor Timsy. Ha, not as much meat on him as'd fatten a jackdaw. Eyes like a spaniel pup. Nose like an onion bulb. An' about as much o' grey hair over his jug-handle ears as would make a toothbrush.

Well, he got out the grog, an' we started to gas. I'd to tell him about this relation an' then about that one, an' he just sittin' there with his mouth open as if he was drinkin' in the news along with his grog. An' ha, a beautiful drop o' grog it was, too, an' I'd be lyin' if I said I'd tasted better.

Nora went out, an' sez Timsy to me when the door closes behind her, "An' phwat d'ye make o' that one, Conal?"

"Well, now," sez I, "she's handsome, man."

"'Twas not that I meant," sez he. "Ah, she's the great cross to me, that Nora one. She does be lyin' about the house all day, fillin' her head wid damn nonsense from books. Faith, there's little I can do wid her since the mother died."

"Who's Danny?" sez I.

"Danny," sez he, "is widout a shadow of doubt the two-facedest louzer this side o' Bagenalstown, God forgive me for sayin' so. Oh, a right scut is Danny, now, may the divil choke him. He'd be about the one age wid yerself, Conal, but d'ye see, he counts here." He looks at me long.

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"Tell me," he sez, "just phwat d'ye think o' that grog, Conal?"

"Well," sez I, "'tis damn nice whatever, Timsy."

"'Tis potheen!" sez he. "An' I'll tell ye one thing an' that's not two—'tis the life's blood o' Loughtrim. D'ye see, Conal, what we can get out o' the ground here wouldn't feed a Chinaman, 'tis that full o' stones, man. An' we can't get a boat into the sea on account o' thim rocks. An' so phwat would we do at all, then, but make us potheen, an' 'tis there that me bold Danny comes in.

"Now, d'ye see, Conal, before Danny came into Loughtrim we'd no kind of a set-up at all. 'Twas made purely for pleasure. Danny knew a thing or two about the distillin', an' he improved the blend greatly. In fact, so much so, Conal, that we're now in the business. We're exporthin' it."

"Well, now," sez I, "if that doesn't beat all!"

"'Tis right enough. I'm on the board o' directors, but 'tis Danny who's manager. 'Tis Danny who sees to the blendin', an' 'tis Danny who markets it. He takes it down into the town there once a week, an' he pays out when he gets back."

"An' is business good, Timsy?"

"Faith, Conal, if only things was straight we could hardly make enough of it, but 'tis my belief there'll be throuble afore long. D'ye see, there's some as sez Danny's too big a twister, an' since he's for ever at fightin' an' blackgyardin' an' makin' enemies, 'tis my opinion somebody'll be givin' him away.

"He's due down in the town wid the latest batch tonight an' there'll be a payin'-out tomorrow. Likely he'll come in here for a bite o' breakfast, an' then ye can see him for yerself."

Little did poor Timsy know: the trouble that he spoke of was just about to start.

Came the dawn, as they say. No Dannyboy appeared for breakfast. Came seven o'clock, eight, an' then nine—an' still no Dannyboy.

At half past nine Timsy went lookin' for him, an' at a quarter to ten he was back, cross as a bag o' weasels. "He's done it!" he sez. "Knipes, he's done it at last—may the divil crack the two legs under him! Ah, glory be to the merciful will o' God, 'tis desthroyed we'll be now."

Nora slips out during' the keenin', an' he shakes his wee head. "Ah, her poor mother," he sez. "She's well out of it, anyway."

"Timsy," I sez, "what's the matter, man?"

"Matter!" sez he. "The matter is he's gone an' clocked a polis. The Danny one. Went into the town last night an' swallowed a skinful, an' phwat did he go an' do then but clock a polis. Doesn't know where the grog is, doesn't know where the

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money is. All he can remember is clockin' the polis an' havin' to run for it."

"Well," I sez, "there's maybe no great harm done. Sure, clockin' a polis is fair sport. There's more grog where that came from, isn't there?"

"Ah," sez Timsy, "ye don't understand, Conal. He's had throuble wid the garda before now. Faith, 'tis only the presence o' Mick Burke—a Loughtrim boy—in the force has saved him up till now. Suppose they come lookin' for him, then phwat'll happen to the business? An' if they find him, they'll lock him up, an' then phwat'll happen to me little Nora? Man, she's that daft she's like to leave alongside him."

"Timsy," I sez, "is there anythin' that's secret about the blendin'? Anythin' that only Danny knows?"

"Oh, not now," sez he. "We know it off pat by now."

"Well, then," sez I, "'twill be a good riddance to bad rubbish if they do lock him up. Ye can make the grog on your own."

"Ah, that's thrue," sez he, "but man, that Nora does worry me. Ah, but for the damn nonsense in them books o' hers she might ha' had Kevin Aloysius McNamara. Faith, there wasn't anythin' in the world he wouldn't ha' done for her."

"An' who is Kevin Aloysius McNamara,?" sez I.

"Oh, he's the grand boy, Conal, is Kevin Aloysius. As dacent a young feller as ever drew breath. Lives in the town, now, small blame to him, an' in business as an undertaker. The damfool Nora chucked him over in favour o' the Danny one—ha, an' he wid a fine future to it, too."

Well, now, Michael, I was for keepin' out o' things. I'd come for a holiday, an' a holiday I'd try me best to have, however unpromisin' me surroundin's.

"Timsy," I sez, "don't fret yourself. Maybe all your little troubles will come to nothin'. An' another thin'," I sez, "maybe that Nora has a mite more sense than ye give her credit for."

I borrowed some tackle, an' went off to catch fish. Lord, what a place! The wind was blowin' in off the wild Atlantic, an' the cold would ha' perished the crows. I stuck it for maybe an hour, then went back to the house—an' faith, instead o' the hot cup o' tea that I thought would be waitin', there was owld Timsy with a face like a boot.

"Ah, Conal," sez he, "there does be throuble a-brewin'. Mick Burke sent up his lassie to warn me just afther ye'd gone. That polis was clocked real hard, an' it looks as if they're out for him—the Danny one. They've put the shtill under observation a bit since, and now there's a guard on the road."

"The still, Timsy?"

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"The shtill, ay. Oh, they're afther him this time. Polisclockin's fair shport enough, an' might fetch him three months, but man, if they can get him for groggin' they can keep him for years."

"Well, now," I sez, "that's dandy, now!"

"Dandy, is it?" sez he. "Man, if they come afther the shtill they'll bring the excise men. They'll wring us dry, man. Sure, they'll go over the whole damn place like an army o' thermites—an' we wid a fortune in grog on our hands, here. Knipes, we'll all be poor as pucks in two flips of a flounder. Ye'll see the men o' Loughtrim mendin' kettles by the roadside."

"Well," I sez, "Timsy, we'll have to think, now. Do you get out the grog an' I'll have a try."

Well, he got out the bottle an' I took a sup—an' faith, 'tis a marvel even to me the way me mind works under malt.

"Timsy," I sez, "where would I be findin' Kevin Aloysius McNamara? An' can ye get me a pony an' trap?"

"Ye'll find him right next door to the churchyard," sez he, "an' I'll fix ye a thrap in two shakes. What're yez up to?"

"I'll tell ye that, Timsy, when I get back," I sez. In two shakes of a tomcat's tail I was into that trap an' away. An' when the constable on the road told me to stop, I sent him sprawlin'. "'Tis a matter o' life an' death," I shouted back at him.

Well, then, I got to the town, an' sure enough there was the establishment o' Kevin Aloysius McNamara next to the cemetery—right in the dead centre o' things, as ye might say. A long, thin specimen he was, too: about the build of a bootlace, an' with his chin worn low on his breast as if out o' respect for his customers. I went straight to the point, after introducin' meself.

"Kevin Aloysius," I sez, "do ye love Nora still?"

"Oh," sez he, "I do indeed, now. Faith, me heart fair leps across me chest whenever I think of her, Misther Donelin. There isn't a thing I wouldn't do for her. Bedad, I was for axin' her to marry me, but she put me off it. Said I'd a dead end job, an' 'twas excitement she wanted."

"Ha," sez I, "I believe ye know a certain gentleman by name Danny Muldoon. Would ye like to be shot of him?"

"Oh, I do, bad cess to the scut. I'd see him in—"

"Right," I sez. "Well, now, with your help he might be leavin' Loughtrim soon. An' if ye'll just do as I say, now, ye'll ease Danny out o' the way, an' yourself into Nora's affections. Will ye do just as I say now?"

Well, he looks at me long. I thought he was measurin' me for a wooden suit. He lifts up his big spade chin an' pulls at his ear.

"I will," he sez.

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" Right, then," sez I. " Now here's what I want ye to do." I gives him his orders, then away I go lookin' for a doctor. God forgive me for the lies I told that quack, but 'twas a desperate situation, an' the enemy closin' in on us every minute.

Back I went to Timsy at the gallop, an' told him me plan. Begob, the poor skin was so shakin' with fright by the time I'd done explainin', that he looked half dead already. I got him into bed, an' when the doctor came along the poor man was baffled. Owld Timsy groaned as any man would with a fortune at stake.

" He's bad," sez the doctor. " Oh, he's bad. Keep him warm, now."

" Go you," I sez to Nora when the doctor's gone, " an' get word to that guard on the road that Timsy Flanagan's bad. Say he's not like to see the night through. Get some youngster to mention it just casual-like."

Off goes Nora an' does her stuff, an' comes back with Danny-boy. A big, barrel-chested brute he was, too, the same boy, with two forearms like bears' thighs, an' fists like ham shanks. An' ha, the two little eyes in his head shinin' like boot buttons from the grog o' the previous evenin'.

" I'm takin' over, here," I sez, leavin' him no room for argument. " Get hould o' two or three good lads, an' as soon as it's dark get you out to that still an' destroy it. Ha, an' bring the grog—every last drop of it—back here to me."

Off goes Dannyboy. I wait till it's nearly sunset, an' then pull down the blinds. " Now, Nora," I sez, " your poor father has just passed away. Go you out an' spread the news round."

Away goes Nora. I get Timsy out o' bed an' we start our vigil. Around midnight in comes Danny with a few of the boys, an' begob, in about no-time flat that house is so full o' potheen it was nearly afloat. Ha, well, now, as ye might expect, when the Irish an' the grog are met together, sure there's little enough doubt about the outcome.

" Timsy," sez somebody, " ye're well out of it, man."

" Faith, Timsy," sez another, " ye make a beautiful corpse, man."

Well, we opened a bottle—just for company, like. At first it was quiet enough. But then as the night wore on some gobskite sez, " Why wouldn't we be havin' poor Paddy here? " An' so somebody goes off to fetch Paddy.

An' then, " Sure, we can't ask Paddy an' leave Ignatius out of it," sez another.

An' sez a third, " I'll just see if Mick's abed yet."

An' to cut a long story short, now, we waked poor owld Timsy like any Christian, an' by three o'clock in the mornin' about

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nine-tenths o' the adult population o' Loughtrim was within them four walls, an' 'sure all that we wanted for complete pandemonium was a piffler an' drum band.

Well, then, came the dawn again at last. An' with it a message from the boyo that I'd posted as lookout in the house at the end of the street. "Oh," sez he, "they've raided the shtill, the craytures! They came all in a line out o' the mist an' found it there, gone. There's about ten o' them now."

"Ha," sez I, "exactly as I'd expected. An' what are they doin' now, at all?"

"Oh," sez he, "they've withdrawn a little ways, an' have the appairance o' reconsiderin' matthers."

"Right," I sez. "Now, then, on your feet every man except Muldoon, here. Away to your homes an' wash your faces. I want every gossoon in the village back here inside five minutes. Ha, an' dressed in your Sunday best, too, if ye want to stay clear o' the law."

"What about me?" sez Dannyboy. "Isn't it me that's in the fix, then?"

"You," sez I, "have a lot to be thankful for. They'll not find the grog if I can help it, an' so ye can only be charged with assault. Faith, man, ye'll be out inside a six-month."

"Ye mean, ye're lavin' me sthranded here?"

"Muldoon," I sez, "this is a financial crisis, man!"

Back came the boys, then, all dressed in their Sunday duds—an' begob the half o' them so full o' grog that if they'd attempted to speak they'd ha' foamed at the mouth.

An' prompt on the crack o' sparrow-fidget me sentry comes up to report again. "Misther Donelin," sez he, "relief in sight." I went to the door, then, an' sure enough, just peepin' over the horizon was the black silk hat o' McNamara.

Man, Michael, I'll never forget me feelin's o' relief when I spotted that hat. The next things in view were the plumes on his horses. An' ha, the next an' most joyous thing of all was the sight o' that hearse, with the sun flashin' fireworks off its glasswork. Man, I tell ye, 'twas the cheerfullest picture in the world.

Up comes Kevin Aloysius to the door. "Bearer party," I sez, "do your stuff!" Out they went an' brought the coffin in. Out went me screenin' party to the road—close on two score o' them—and effectively covered the hearse from the pryin' eyes of the garda. "Loadin' party," I sez, "up grog! An' put the best in the coffin, mind."

Then Kevin Aloysius starts.

"What's this?" sez he, chin down. "There's been a misundersthandin', sure. I thought I was takin' Muldoon out. Faith,

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Misther Donelin, ye never told me your thrue intentions."

"Brother," I sez, "come in an' take a glass with me."

"Oh," sez he, "I'm not a dhrinkin' man. 'Tis no use your tryin' to get round me that way."

"Will ye get into that parlour," I sez, "or do I drag you in?"

Well, then, I got him inside, an' after a great deal o' gas I got a grog into him.

I explained the whole situation, an' told him how it would break poor Nora's heart if her owld father lost his livelihood. "An' moreover," sez I, "'tis the economic future o' the whole o' Loughtrim we have at stake, don't ye see."

Well, he thought it over. He finished his grog, an' right down went his chin. Begob, then, if he didn't have another glass o' grog an' go lookin' for Dannyboy. "Muldoon," sez he, "ye want out, don't ye? Well, now I'll tell ye one thing, Muldoon, an' that's not two: 'tis out that ye're goin', sure."

Everybody stopped loadin'. Nora stood dumbfounded, an' the two bright eyes in her head stood out like doorknobs.

"An' I'll tell ye another thing," sez he, "an' that's not three: ye're goin' *now*!"

Faith, ye could ha' blown me over with a scent spray, but he wasn't finished yet.

Sez he, waggin' his forefinger at the loaders, "An' I'll tell yez lot somethin', too: divil a drop o' yer damn product do I take away from this house unless that louzer comes wid me—so yez can make up yer minds on it!"

Well, now I'll tell ye this, Michael, there was damn little time wasted in argument. Danny was for trimmin' him, but Loughtrim was solid for Kevin. They'd had enough o' me bold Dannyboy by this time, an' their only single thought was to get the grog away to safety.

Ha, 'twas a very chastened Dannyboy by the time they'd said their say to him.

"What will I do?" sez he, with the bejasus beaten right out of him. "Will I get inside the coffin, then?"

"Ye will not, then," sez Kevin. "I'd choke wid me own galluses before I'd leave grog as good as this to make room for a scut like you. What you'll do, Muldoon, is to travel up front."

"On the footbox, is it?"

"*Inside* the footbox!" sez Kevin. "An' if ye double yourself over threble, ye'll just about make it. I'll drop ye off at the railway."

Man, Michael, ye could ha' heard the fall o' dewdrops.

"Loadin' party," I sez, "at the double, now!" An' from that moment on the operation went like clockwork. The coffin was

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loaded up, Danny was loaded up, I got up on top o' the box beside the driver, an' the villagers formed up behind—faith, an' most o' them loaded up, too!

They lit the candles Nora gave out to them, an' away we went slowly down the road, recitin' the Litany o' the Saints—poor owld Timsy watchin' his funeral from behind the drawn blinds. The garda took off their caps as the hearse went past them, an' we never looked back till we were safely away from Loughtrim.

Ha, an' then, thinkin' o' Dannyboy curled up double beneath our backsides, I just couldn't resist it. I nudged Kevin Aloysius an' winked.

"Gallop!" I sez.

My Uncle Conal broached a second glass of Wicklow Cream. "Did everything turn out all right?" I said.

"Oh, tiptop, tiptop."

"And did Danny go away?"

"Oh, he did, an' quick, too: Kevin Aloysius bought him a single ticket to Queenstown."

"And did Kevin marry Nora?"

"Oh, he did. He did just that. From what I heard, he never had a moment's trouble after showin' her he could be masterful. He'd a fine head on him, too, the same boy, an' once he'd tasted that grog he was like a man inspired. D'ye see, it occurred to him that an undertaker's was just the place to start up the still again. He got two or three of the boys from Loughtrim as technical assistants, an' bedad if he didn't go into the business. Ha, an' did so well from it he turned legitimate."

"Legitimate, Uncle Conal?"

My Uncle Conal reached out and pushed the whisky bottle towards me, indicating the very small type at the bottom of its label. I read it aloud.

Distilled by K. A. McNamara and Sons, Wicklow

The curate rubbed his chin. "Well, now, if that doesn't beat all. Faith, I never heard that before."

I looked first at the curate, and then at my uncle. Slyly, he winked at me.

"Would you be trying a malt, Michael?" said he.

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★ ★ ★

BITTEN WITH ENTHUSIASM

All the essentials for picnics are now put in tins except for the ants.

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A REAL BORN KILLER

BY MICHAEL GILBERT

IT was Bernard who first told Petrella that Bash Warrender was out.

Bernard used to park his taxi at the end of Gabriel Street, and he recognised it as his privilege to take Detective Inspector Petrella home in the evenings when that hard-worked man was late or in a hurry. He liked to leave the intervening partition open so that he could drive and talk at the same time.

"Ol' Bash," said Bernard, "he come out this morning. Maximum remission for good behaviour. Doesn't sound like Bash, eh?"

Petrella had never met Bash, who had been in the middle of a

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two-year stretch for a rail depot robbery when Petrella first came to the Division, but he had heard plenty of stories of the Terror of Pardoe Street. He agreed that good behaviour was not the sort of thing normally associated with Bash.

"You know what I think—stick your hand out that far, lady, I'll kiss it," (this to a woman driver who was signalling her intention of turning to the right) "what I think is, he was what you might call holding himself in."

"And why would he do that?"

"He was holding himself in, because he wanted to get out of clink as quick as possible."

"If I went to prison," said Petrella, "I'd always want to get out as quick as possible."

"Some people mind it less than others," said Bernard. "Ol' Bash, actually, it's all the same to him really if he's in or out. He gets better grub when he's inside, but they won't give him anything to drink. He's all right, ol' Bash, except when he's got a skinful, then you want to watch your step an' all. What I was saying, this time he had a special reason for getting out quick. That's why he behaved himself."

"And what would that be?"

"That job he went up for, he wasn't in it alone. There was Mick Moran—you know Mick?"

Petrella knew Mick.

"And two or three others as well. No names no pack drill. But Mick was the one who organised it. Everyone knew that."

"Except the police, apparently."

"I reckon the police knew it all right. Only they couldn't tie it to Mick. The only one they could pin was Bash. They caught *him* right on the job, inside the shed, with a jemmy and a pair of bolt shears he'd used to cut the padlock off the door. He couldn't talk *them* away."

Petrella said, "It sounds like he had a bad break. But I don't see what he's got to complain about. He can't be lucky all the time."

"Bash reckons it wasn't bad luck. He reckons Mick shopped him."

"Why would Mick do that?"

"They had a difference of opinion," said Bernard, "in the Saloon Bar of The Keys. Bash hit Mick with a pint mug. So when he found the cops actually, as you might say, laying for him—one inside the shed, and two outside—well, he got the idea it was Mick tipped them off."

"If Bash thinks Mick did that," said Petrella, "we'd better watch out for storms."

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"Speaking personally," said Bernard, "I don't see why you should bother. I'd let 'em both cut each other's head off. None of us'd be a penny the poorer if they did, would we? Here we are. Home again. Didden take too long, did it?"

Petrella had rooms, at that time, on the second floor of a house in Brinkman Road, Blackheath. It was a good distance outside the Division, and this had both advantages and disadvantages. It was a nuisance when he was called out at night, and had to get back after all public transport had ceased. The advantage of the arrangement was that when he did get home, he felt he had really left his work behind him.

He ate his supper, washed up, laid breakfast, poured himself a glass of doubtful port, took off his collar and tie, turned on the wireless, and selected one of nine books on Contract Bridge from the shelf beside his chair. He was immersed in the complications of the Vienna Coup, to the appropriate strains of a Viennese waltz, when the frontdoor bell rang.

Petrella frowned, but made no immediate move. He was trying to work out who it could possibly be. The Wetheralls never bothered to ring. Mrs. Wetherall sometimes rattled the door handle, under the delusion that she might surprise him in an embarrassing state of undress. Mr. Wetherall always barged straight in.

The bell rang again.

Petrella got unwillingly to his feet, padded across, and opened the door.

Standing outside was a woman. In her early thirties, he judged, and good-looking once. Black hair, white face, and high cheekbones suggested a Central European origin. The clothes were shabby, but neat. These were secondary impressions. His attention was concentrated on her right cheek, where a savage bruise was still bleeding.

"I'm sorry I was so slow," he said. "Has there been an accident?"

"An accident, no." The voice confirmed Petrella's first view. Polish, he guessed. "No, I came to you for protection."

"You are—?"

"I am Mrs. Warrender."

"I see," said Petrella. "Come in. I take it your husband has been celebrating his release."

"He came back this morning," said the woman. She spoke in a matter-of-fact, unshocked voice which demonstrated more clearly than hysterics what life with Bash would be likely to be. "I gave him some money. He went out again. He said he was looking for a man he wished to kill. He did not find him, but he

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found plenty to drink. Early this evening he came back, and I gave him something to eat."

Petrella had a strangely clear picture of this meal. A kitchen table, the pale, quiet woman at one end; at the other, couchant and embattled as he shovelled food into himself, the big brute, red-eyed, glowering, already more than half drunk.

"What happened?" he said.

"I said something that annoyed him. He threw his cup at me. It broke the glass in the door. That seemed to annoy him more. He came across and hit me. He did other things to me as well."

She held out her hands, palms upward, and Petrella could see, on each wrist, the livid prints of four long, thin fingers. So fierce had been the grip that the mark of each individual finger was still clear in the flesh.

"After he had humiliated me, he left me," said the woman. "He went to drink. I was afraid to remain."

She sat looking at him, as if hoping for some solution to the insoluble problem she presented. When and why had she married him? At the age of sixteen or seventeen, probably, thought Petrella. During or just after the war to avoid going back to Poland. If there had been some motive of duplicity in the marriage, she had been paying for it cent per cent, at interest, ever since.

"I'd keep you here for the night," he said, "only—"

"I quite realise that would not be possible." A fleeting smile crossed her face, and Petrella saw again how attractive she must have been before life had trapped her.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs brought him to his feet.

Then, as they passed his door, he guessed that it was Mr. Wetherall, the headmaster of the South Borough Secondary School, who occupied the top flat with his wife and eight-year-old son.

It gave him an idea. The Wetheralls were practical Samaritans; and they had a sofa. Mrs. Warrender said, "It is kind of you. But I could not agree. If my husband discovered it would make trouble for your friend—"

"I would guess," said Petrella, "that Mr. Wetherall is well able to look after himself. You sit tight, while I have a word with him."

Mr. Wetherall, a weatherbeaten man with a remarkable facial resemblance to the Duke of Wellington, hardly blinked at the idea that a strange young lady should occupy his sofa. Twenty-five years of schoolmastering in South London had made him a difficult man to surprise.

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" Of course she can," he said. " We'll have to put Simba in the kitchen. He'll scratch on the door a bit. Warn her about that. And ask her if she likes coffee or tea for breakfast. It's no extra trouble. We drink both."

Petrella set his alarm clock for half past five the next morning and was out in the quiet sunlit streets by a quarter past six. He caught an early bus and was in Southwark twenty minutes later. Pardoe Street is a dead end, running down to the railway. One side is a brick wall; the other, a row of tiny, insanitary cottages, blackened, eroded stumps, still standing, against all the laws of probability, like the last few defiant teeth of a nonagenarian.

All the doors were shut and the windows curtained. Number fourteen was at the end, nearest to the railway, and Petrella, knowing the ways of such houses, avoided the front door and made his way down the flagged passage to the back.

The back door was unfastened. In the kitchen the dirty crockery on the table and the unwashed saucepans in the sink bore witness to the haste of Mrs. Warrender's departure the previous night. The door leading into the front hall had two long panes of frosted glass. The lefthand one had been freshly shattered. The break in the glass was shaped like an Indian's head, feather bonnet and all.

Petrella stood for a few seconds looking at it seriously. Then he stepped forward, his feet scrunching the pieces of broken glass scattered across the floor, pushed the door open, and went through into the front hall.

On his right was the single downstairs room. He looked in, but it was empty and dark and smelt of disuse.

As he stood there listening, he located a noise. Someone was snoring.

He walked up the steep-pitched stairs with their narrow treads. On his left lay the only other room in the house. Petrella hesitated for a moment, then knocked gently. The snoring continued unabated. He opened the door and looked in.

A man lay on the bed, fully dressed except for his coat, his boots sticking out from the end of the cotton bedspread which only partly covered him. Petrella kicked the end of the bed. Its occupant rolled over.

He was one of the ugliest men Petrella had ever seen. Under a frizz of grey-black hair, two bloodshot, bulbous eyes looked out. They protruded, but in very slightly different directions. Below them was a nose which had been several times broken and only sketchily reset, a mouthful of yellow tusks, and a chin decorated with two days' stubble. Across the chin ran a fresh, deep cut.

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"Ooer you?" he said.

"I'm a detective inspector," said Petrella, "and I've come to tell you that while you're in my Division you've got to behave yourself."

Bash Warrender sat up slowly. Petrella saw that his forearms were covered with a mat of black hair; from the backs of his spatulate fingers sprouted further hair, in the midst of which winked two heavy, gold signet rings, like splashes of sunlight in a dark forest.

Bash completed the task of hoisting himself upright. He did it slowly because the room was spinning round in front of him. His divergent eyes focused on Petrella's face. They seemed surprised at what they saw. "You a flattie?" he asked.

"That's right," said Petrella.

"You got no right in here. I haven't done nothing."

"You call knocking your wife about nothing?"

"Who said I knocked her about?"

"She said so. Not that it was necessary. She's got a bruise on her face, and a cut. I imagine that ring of yours did the damage."

Bash had lost him by this time. Two Petrellas swam slowly in front of him, twin moons in a Milky Way. He made a supreme effort. The faces came together, and seemed to be looking down at him severely.

"We had an argument," he muttered. "She walked out."

"She's walking back again, today," said Petrella. "And if you lay a hand on her, you'll go inside again. For quite a long time."

"She can come back if she likes," said Bash. "It's her house."

On this qualified note of apology, Petrella took himself off. He had breakfast at a café in the New Kent Road, read the strip cartoons and the cricket scores in his favourite newspaper, and got to Gabriel Street Police Station by nine o'clock.

At ten o'clock Sergeant Lowther looked in and said, "We've got Mick Moran here. Says he wants to see you."

"Show him in," said Petrella.

Mick was an Irishman. Petrella knew him as a man who fought for the fun of it and bore few grudges. His opening words were the more surprising. "I'm making an application," he said, "for a gun."

"You mean, you want a licence to carry a gun."

"A licence, that's it."

"What sort of gun?"

"It's not a sporting gun I'm after," said Mick, "but a pistol."

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Petrella thought hard. Then he pulled across a scribbling block and said, " Perhaps you'd better let me have the details."

" Details? "

" Of the pistol you want the licence for. Make, calibre, number. That sort of thing."

" How can I tell you all that sort of thing when I haven't yet got the gun? "

Petrella said, " The Court can't grant a general licence. It has to be a licence for a definite weapon."

" And if I showed it to you—so that you could write all these details down—you'd take me up for having a gun without a licence."

" Something in that," said Petrella. " Look here, perhaps you'd better tell me what you want it for."

" You know very well why I want it," said Mick. " Isn't Bash Warrender out? And going about breathing fire and slaughter against me for something I never did? "

" Has he been doing that? "

" Last night, at The Keys. When he'd filled himself up with whisky and beer, and the courage that goes with it."

" Were you down at The Keys yourself? "

" I was not down at The Keys. Would you have me provoke a breach of the peace? But there were plenty there who heard him."

" Such as—? "

" Leo Korner, for one."

" I'll have a word with Leo," said Petrella. " But I don't think you want to make too much of this. And in particular, if I were you, I think I should dump that gun—the one you haven't yet got, I mean."

Petrella had a message sent out, and met Leo Korner by arrangement that afternoon in a teashop near the Elephant and Castle. There was little about Leo to suggest the monarch of the jungle. He was a slight young man, with dark, wavy hair. His family came from Belgium, and he was an electroplater.

" That's right," he said. " I was in The Keys, last night, when Bash came in. About eight o'clock it would be. He was carrying on like a madman. The landlord would have thrown him out if he had been able to."

" Not an easy man to throw out," agreed Petrella. " What was he carrying on about in particular? "

" Most of it was about Mick Moran, and how Mick was a snout, and what he was going to do to Mick when he caught him."

" Had he cut his chin? "

This simple question seemed to puzzle Leo. He thought hard

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about it. Then he said that he rather thought that Bash had.

Petrella went back to his office a badly worried man.

"Any fool," as he said to Superintendent Benjamin when reporting the matter to him later, "could see there was trouble coming. The difficulty was knowing just what to do about it."

In the end he thought of Bernard. "I want you to do something for me."

"As long as it's not dangerous," said Bernard. "I've got a weak heart."

"It's just an inquiry. I can't do it myself. I want you to get down to The Keys, and find out from some of the regulars just what *did* happen there last night. Bash was in there, kicking up a shindig. I want to know what he said, and try to find out if anyone noticed whether he had a cut on his chin or not."

"I'll have to stand 'em a few drinks."

"Ten bob should get them started. You can park your cab in the vacant lot behind the pub—I'll make it right with the man on the beat. I'll be inside the cab about ten o'clock."

"Do what I can," said Bernard.

At a quarter past nine, under cover of dusk, Petrella strolled down Pardoe Street. There was a light showing under the street door, but the front room was dark. He drew back into the shadows and waited.

Heavy footsteps sounded at the end of the street. Petrella backed still farther into the corner of the wall. There was no lamp at that end, and he had turned up his coat to conceal the whiteness of his shirt and collar.

The man who was approaching had no eyes for possible watchers. He stumped up to the door of the end house and knocked. At once there came the double thud of bolts being opened, top and bottom. Mrs. Warrender must have been waiting for her visitor. Petrella saw her clearly, in the light of the opened door. He recognised the visitor, too. It was Mick Moran. The front door slammed and the bolts were re-shot.

He looked down at his watch. The illuminated hands stood at twenty minutes to ten. The puppets were moving punctually to their cues, under the hand of the puppet master.

Twenty minutes later, he was sitting in the back of Bernard's cab listening to its owner.

"Bash is in there right now," said Bernard.

"Which bar?"

"Public Bar. The saloon's round the front."

"What's he doing?"

"He's sitting wedged up against a corner of the bar, drinking

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beer. Surprising how much beer a man can put away if he gives his mind to it, innit? Leo's with him."

Petrella nodded. He had felt sure that Leo would be with him. "And what did you find out about last night?"

"That's funny," said Bernard. "I talked to two or three of 'em—before Bash came in, that was—Porky Hogg, Chum Harrison, Bill Bailey, that lot from the market. They were all there last night. They said Bash was there, all right. And he'd been drinking. But nothing to write home about. And none of them heard him say anything about Mick. Actually, he was singing most of the time."

"Singing?"

"That's right. Hear Bash sing 'Rock of Ages,' brings tears to your eyes. The boys always enjoy that."

"I see," said Petrella. "Did anyone notice his chin?"

"Porky said he'd got a cut on it. Definitely. It was still bleeding a bit."

"I was afraid of that," said Petrella. "Is there anywhere—do you think—we could watch him without him seeing us?"

"Private Bar. No one in there just now. I'll go and have a dekko."

Bernard reported the Private Bar empty. It made an admirable observation post, commanding the other public bars but screened from them by an extension of the dividing partition.

It was approaching closing time. The Saloon Bar was cheerful. The Public Bar was bedlam. It gave out a blast of heat and noise, a tangible emanation of spirits which reached even the secluded backwater in which they stood.

Petrella could see Bash. He was, as Bernard had said, wedged into the corner between the end of the bar and the wall. Close up against him, talking almost into his ear, was Leo. What he could see of Bash's expression was ugly.

"I wish I could hear what Leo was saying to him."

"You wouldn't hear a nine-five howitzer go off in this little lot," said Bernard. "Blimey. What's bitten him now?"

Bash had suddenly risen to his feet. His staring eyes were nearly as red as his face. His mouth was working; his great hands clenching and unclenching.

"Looks as if he's having some sort of fit," said Bernard thoughtfully. "Gor blimey O'Reilly! He's off again."

Bash had picked up a pint glass and smashed it down three or four times on the counter, till it cracked and broke, leaving the handle and a splintered halo of glass in his hand.

They saw the landlord groping under the counter for the truncheon he kept there against such emergencies. Before he

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could find it Bash was gone, cleaving his way through a crowd suddenly fallen silent. Then the door swung shut behind him.

"Get your cab out, and we'll follow him," said Petrella. "We shan't lose him now. He's going home."

"Why don't we get ahead," said Bernard, "and warn his missus? If he gets home in that sort of shine and finds her there, he'll carve her up."

"No," said Petrella. "I think we'll stick right behind him."

"You're the boss," said Bernard.

"Besides," said Petrella, "if I'm right, it's not his wife he's after. It's Mick Moran."

They had no difficulty in keeping Bash in sight. He forged steadily forward. The night air seemed to be doing him good. He passed a patrolling policeman who looked at him curiously.

"Quite steady on his pins, really," said Bernard. "Here we are. Pardoe Street on the right."

"Leave her here," said Petrella. They looked cautiously down the short dark street. Bash had reached his own house. He, too, seemed to be proceeding with some caution. He tried the front door, found it locked, came back down the steps, and pushed open the gate leading into the side passage.

Petrella said to Bernard, "You can fetch your cab up now. We may need it as an ambulance." Then he, too, tiptoed down the passage and into the backyard. He arrived there at the exact moment that Bash put the sole of one boot against the back door, kicked it open, and surged through into the kitchen.

Petrella pressed his nose against the kitchen window. He reckoned that no one inside would have eyes for him, and he could see and hear nicely.

"So that's what goes on, you black hoor you," said Bash.

"You've no call to say that." Mick was on his feet. "She asked me to come round. Why wouldn't I?"

"Soon's my back's turned."

"Anything we done," said Mick, "we'd do again in front of you, it'd make no difference."

"Irish bastard," said Bash, and jumped. Drink had slowed him, but not much. Mick ducked the swing, tore himself free from the grabbing clutch that followed, and got back behind the table. The positions were now reversed. Mick and the woman were on Petrella's side, with their backs to him. Bash was crouched opposite.

Suddenly he dipped, picked up the table, and heaved it. Mick countered by grabbing the edge nearest to him. The table rose between them, like flotsam on the crest of a wave. As it lifted, the drawer slid out and kitchen utensils, knives, potato

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peelers, and skewers cascaded to the floor. Both men let go at the same time, and the table crashed in ruins between them.

There was something black in the woman's hand. She was thrusting it on Mick. "He'll murder us both," she said. "Use it quick. It's your only chance."

Mick looked down at the gun in his hand. He seemed puzzled to think how it had got there. Bash looked at it, too. Petrella realised that he was far from drunk; much of his fury seemed to have abated.

"Put it down, Mick," he said. "Are you an Irishman? You can settle a little difference with your hands, now."

"Sure. I'm not afraid of you," said Mick. "Take your toy back, woman."

"You fool," said Mrs. Warrender. The unexpected lash in her voice cracked so sharply that both men threw their heads back, as if she had in fact struck them across the face.

"If you haven't the guts to do it," she said, "after all he's done to me—"

Her hand came up slowly, the knuckles white.

Petrella grabbed wildly for a weapon, found the lid of the dustbin to his hand, and with it burst the window inwards, glass and all.

Echoing the splintering crack came the roar of the gun.

Bash went down on his knees as Mick and Petrella reached the woman from different sides. She had fired four times before they got the gun from her.

"Not dead," said Petrella to Superintendent Benjamin a few weeks later. "Not even badly wounded. You can't hurt a man like Bash. He's not living with his wife any more, of course."

"Where's she?"

"Mrs. Warrender's living with Leo. Which I'd guess was her intention all along. Bash has teamed up with Mick. They seem to have got over their differences."

"It'd be a common bond," said Benjamin, "being made fools of by the same woman. When did you realise that she was working things so that Mick would kill Bash?"

"Or vice versa. She didn't care which of them killed the other. One would be dead. The other would go to gaol. She'd be done with them both. A neat idea, really."

"And when did you see through it?"

"I'm not sure," said Petrella. "Fairly soon. I had one advantage. I knew that it was Mrs. Warrender, and not Mick, who'd tipped us off about the rail depot robbery. But there were other things, too. The first time she showed me the

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fingerprint marks on her wrists, they didn't look like my idea of Bash's. Too long, too thin. When I saw his hands next morning, the whole thing became quite impossible. He'd got squat, thick fingers and was wearing a couple of rings. If it'd been Bash who grabbed her wrists, you'd have seen the marks of those rings, and no mistake."

"Then who did it?"

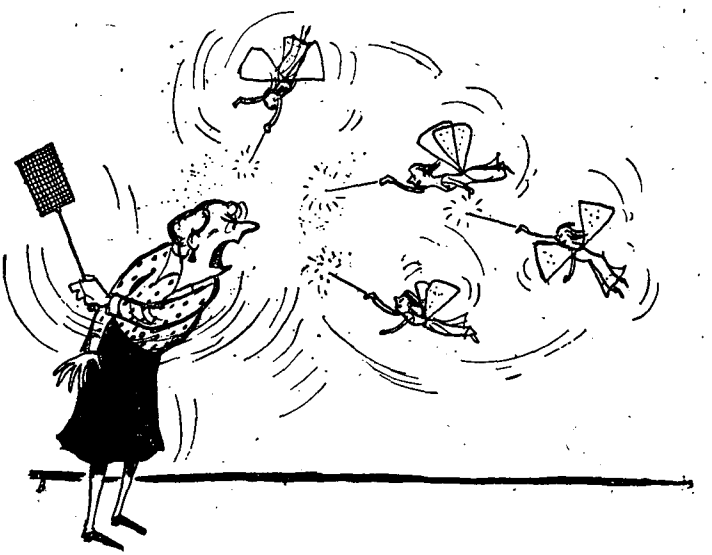
"Leo, I'd guess," said Petrella. "And marked her face. It was quite a thorough-going frame up. They missed out on one or two details, that's all. Like when she said that Bash had thrown his cup at her and broken the glass in the door. That couldn't have been true. The glass was all *inside* the room. I trod in it when I went down next morning. That's when I knew that she was lying for certain."

"What's Bash going to do next?"

"The divisional boys at Camberwell say that he and Mick are planning to hold up a bank."

"Dangerous game," said Benjamin.

"Not as dangerous as living with Mrs. Warrender," said Petrella. "Not by a long way."



"Go on, now; back to the bottom of the garden!"

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SITTING PRETTY

Claud grinned and nudged me in the ribs—
he pointed through the branches

BY ROALD DAHL

ALL day, in between serving customers, we had crouched over the table in the office of my garage, preparing the raisins. They were all plump and soft from being soaked in water, and when you nicked them with a razor blade the skin sprang open and the jelly stuff inside squeezed out as easily as you could wish. But we had a hundred and ninety-six of them to do altogether, and the evening was nearly upon us before we had finished.

"Don't they look marvellous!" Claud cried, rubbing his hands together hard. "What time is it, Gordon?"

"Just after five."

Through the window, we could see a shooting brake pulling up at the petrol pumps, with a woman at the wheel and about eight children in the back eating ice-creams.

"We ought to be moving soon," Claud said. "The whole thing'll be a washout if we don't arrive before sunset, you realise that."

He was getting twitchy now. His face had the same flushed and popeyed look it got before a dog race.

We both went outside, and Claud gave the woman the number of gallons she wanted. When she had gone, he remained standing in the middle of the drive, squinting anxiously up at the sun, which was now only the width of a man's hand above the line of trees along the crest of the ridge on the far side of the valley.

"All right," I said. "Lock up."

He went quickly from pump to pump, securing each nozzle in its holder with a small padlock.

"You'd better take off that yellow pullover," he said.

"Why should I?"

"You'll be shining like a bloody beacon out there in the moonlight."

"I'll be all right."

"You will not," he said. "Take it off, Gordon, please. I'll see you in three minutes." He disappeared into his caravan

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behind the garage, and I went indoors and changed my yellow pullover for a blue one.

When we met again outside, Claud was dressed in a pair of black trousers and a dark green turtleneck sweater. On his head he wore a brown cloth cap with the peak pulled down low over his eyes, and he looked like an apache actor out of a night club.

"What's under there?" I asked, seeing the bulge at his waistline.

He pulled up his sweater and showed me two thin but very large white cotton sacks bound neat and tight round his belly. "To carry the stuff," he said.

"I see."

"Let's go," he said.

"I still think we ought to take the car."

"It's too risky. They'll see it parked."

"But it's over three miles up to that wood."

"Yes," he said. "And I suppose you realise we can get six months in clink if they catch us."

"You never told me that."

"Didn't I?"

"I'm not coming," I said. "It's not worth it."

"The walk will do you good, Gordon. Come on."

It was a calm, sunny evening, with little wisps of brilliant white cloud hanging motionless in the sky, and the valley was cool and very quiet as the two of us began walking along the grass on the side of the road that ran between the hills towards Oxford.

Ten minutes later, we turned left off the main road into a narrow lane with high hedges on either side, and from then on it was all uphill.

"You've got the raisins?" Claud asked.

"They're in my pocket."

"Good," he said. "Marvellous. You ought to be very proud of yourself," he went on. "There's been men with brains studying this problem for hundreds of years, and not one of them's ever come up with anything even a quarter as artful as you have. Why didn't you tell me about it before?"

"You never invited my opinion," I said.

And that was the truth.

Often enough, on a summer's evening when work was finished, I had seen him, with cap on head, sliding quietly out of his caravan and disappearing up the road towards the woods; and sometimes, watching him through the window of the garage, I would find myself wondering exactly what he was going to do, what tricks he was going to practise all alone up there under the

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trees in the night. He seldom came back until very late, and never, absolutely never, did he bring any of the spoils with him on his return.

This summer he had been particularly active, and during the past couple of months he had stepped up the tempo to a point where he was going out four and sometimes five nights a week. But that was not all. It seemed to me that recently his whole attitude had undergone a subtle and mysterious change. He was more purposeful about it now, more tight-lipped and intense, and I had formed the impression that this was not so much a game any longer as a sort of private war that he was waging against the famous Mr. Victor Hazel himself.

Mr. Hazel, owner of our local brewery, had an unbelievably arrogant manner. He was rich beyond words, and his property stretched for miles along either side of the valley. He was a self-made man, with no charm at all and precious few virtues.

He loathed all persons of humble station, having once been one of them himself, and he strove desperately to mingle with what he believed were the right kind of people. He rode to hounds, gave shooting parties, and wore fancy waistcoats.

Every weekday he drove an enormous black Rolls past the garage on his way to and from his brewery. As he flashed by we would sometimes catch a glimpse of his great, glistening face above the wheel, pink as ham, all soft and inflamed from drinking too much beer.

Anyway, the day before, which was Wednesday, Claud said to me, right out of the blue, "I'll be going on up to Hazel's woods again tonight. Why don't you come along?"

"Why the sudden invitation?" I asked.

"No special reason, Gordon. No reason at all." There was a long pause. Then he said, "Do you think you could keep your mouth shut if I was to tell you a thing or two?"

"Definitely."

"I've never told this to anyone else in my whole life, Gordon."

"I am greatly honoured," I said. "You can trust me completely."

He turned his head, fixing me with pale eyes. "I am now about to let you in on the three best ways in the world of poaching a pheasant," he said. "And seeing that you're the guest on this little trip, I am going to give you the choice of which one you'd like us to use tonight. How's that?"

"There's a catch in this."

"There's no catch, Gordon. I swear it."

"All right, go on."

"Now, here's the thing," he said. "Here's the very first big

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secret." He paused and took a long suck at his cigarette.

"Pheasants," he whispered softly, "is *crazy* about raisins."

"Raisins?"

"Just ordinary raisins. It's like a mania with them. My dad discovered that more than forty years ago, just like he discovered all three of these methods. My dad studied poaching like a scientist."

"Is that so?"

"Do you know," he said, "my dad used to keep a whole flock of prime cockerels in the backyard, purely for experimental purposes."

"Cockerels?"

"That's right. And whenever he thought up some new stunt for catching a pheasant, he'd try it out on a cockerel first to see how it worked. That's how he discovered about raisins. It's also how he invented the horsehair method."

Claud paused and glanced over his shoulder, as though to make sure there was nobody listening.

"First you take a few raisins and you soak them overnight in water to make them nice and plump and juicy. Then you get a bit of good, stiff horsehair and you cut it up into half-inch lengths. Then you push one of these lengths of horsehair through the middle of each raisin, so that there's about an eighth of an inch of it sticking out on either side. You follow?"

"Yes."

"Now. The old pheasant comes along and eats one of these raisins. Right? And you're watching him from behind a tree. So, what then?"

"I imagine it sticks in his throat."

"That's obvious, Gordon. But here's the amazing thing. Here's what my dad discovered. The moment this happens, the bird *never moves his feet again.* He becomes absolutely rooted to the spot, and there he stands pumping his silly neck up and down, and all you've got to do is walk calmly out from the place where you're hiding and pick him up in your hands."

"I don't believe that."

"I swear it," he said. "Once a pheasant's had the horsehair, you can fire a rifle in his ear and he won't even jump. It's just one of these unexplainable little things. But it takes a genius to discover it."

He paused, and there was a gleam of pride in his eye as he dwelt for a moment upon the memory of his father.

"So that's Method Number One," Claud said. "And Method Number Two is simpler still. All you do is you have a fishing line. Then you bait the hook with a raisin, and you fish for

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the pheasant just like you fish for a fish. You pay out the line about fifty yards, and you lie there on your stomach in the bushes, waiting till you get a bite. Then you haul him in."

"I don't think your father was the first to invent that one."

"It's very popular with fishermen," he said, choosing not to hear me. "Keen fishermen who can't get down to the seaside as often as they want. It gives them a bit of the old thrill."

"What is Method Number Three?" I asked.

"Ah," he said. "Number Three's a real beauty. It was the last one my dad ever invented. First of all you dig a little hole in the ground. Then you twist a piece of paper into the shape of a cone and you fit this into the hole, hollow end upwards like a cup. Then you smear the paper cup all round the inside with birdlime, and drop in a few raisins. At the same time, you lay a trail of raisins along the ground leading up to it.

"Now the old pheasant comes pecking along the trail, and when he gets to the hole, he pops his head inside to gobble the raisins, and the next thing he knows, he's got a paper hat stuck over his eyes and he can't see a thing. No bird in the world is going to run away once you cover up his eyes. Isn't it marvellous what some people think of, Gordon? Don't you agree?"

"Your dad was a genius," I said.

"Then take your pick. Choose whichever one of the three methods you fancy, and we'll use it tonight."

"You don't think they're all just a trifle on the crude side, do you?"

"Crude!" he cried, aghast. "And who's been having roast pheasant in the house nearly every single day for the last six months and not a penny to pay?"

I could see that he was deeply pained by my remark. "Wait a minute," I said. "Do you remember that bottle of sleeping pills the doctor gave me last month when I had a bad back?"

"What about them?"

"Is there any reason why those wouldn't work on a pheasant?"

Claud closed his eyes and shook his head pityingly.

"Wait," I said.

"It's not worth discussing," he said. "No pheasant in the world is going to swallow those red capsules. Don't you know any better than that?"

"You are forgetting the raisins," I said. "Now listen to this. We take a raisin. Then we soak it till it swells. Then we make a tiny slit in one side of it with a razor blade. Then we hollow it out a little. Then we open up one of my red capsules and pour all the powder into the raisin. Then we get a needle and cotton, and very carefully we sew up the slit. Then . . ."

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Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Claud's mouth slowly beginning to open. I paused for ten seconds to allow the full impact of this to strike home.

"With this method we could operate on a really grand scale. We could prepare twenty raisins if we felt like it, and all we'd have to do is scatter them in the feeding grounds at sunset and then walk away. Half an hour later we'd come back, and the pills would be beginning to work, and the pheasants would be up in the branches by then, roosting, and they'd be starting to feel sleepy and soon every pheasant that had eaten one single raisin would keel over unconscious and fall to the ground. My dear boy, they'd be dropping out of the trees like apples, and all we'd have to do is walk round picking them up."

Claud was staring at me, rapt.

"And they'd never catch us, either. We'd simply stroll through the woods, dropping a few raisins here and there as we went, and even if the keepers were watching us, they wouldn't notice anything."

"Gordon," he said, laying a hand on my knee, "if this thing works, it will revolutionise poaching."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"How many pills have you got left?" he asked.

"Forty-nine. There were fifty in the bottle, and I've only used one."

"Forty-nine's not enough. We want at least two hundred."

He walked slowly away and stood by the door with his back to me, gazing at the sky. "Two hundred's the bare minimum," he said quietly. "There's really not much point in doing it unless we have two hundred."

What the hell's he trying to do? I wondered.

"This is almost the last chance we'll have before the season opens," he said.

"I couldn't possibly get any more."

"You wouldn't want us to come back empty-handed, would you?"

"But why so many?"

Claud looked at me with large, innocent eyes. "Why not?" he said gently. "Have you any objection?"

Lord, I thought suddenly. The crazy bastard is out to wreck Mr. Victor Hazel's opening-day shooting party.

Mr. Hazel's party took place on the first of October every year, and it was a very famous event. Debilitated gentlemen in tweed suits motored in from miles away with their gunbearers and dogs and wives; and all day long the noise of shooting rolled across the valley. There were always enough pheasants to go round, for each

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summer the woods were methodically restocked with dozens and dozens of young birds at incredible expense.

I had heard it said that the cost of rearing and keeping each pheasant until it was ready to be shot was well over five pounds. But to Mr. Hazel it was worth every penny of it. He became, if only for a few hours, a big cheese in a little world, and even the county slapped him on the back and tried to remember his first name when they said good-bye.

"You'll get us two hundred of those pills," Claud said, "and then it'll be worth doing."

"I can't."

"How would it be if we just reduced the dose?" he said. "Why couldn't we divide the contents of one capsule among four raisins?"

One simply had to admire the man's nerve. It was dangerous enough to poach a single pheasant up in those woods at this time of year, and here he was planning to knock off the whole lot.

"A quarter would be plenty," I said.

"You're sure of that?"

"Work it out for yourself. It's all done by body weight. You'd still be giving more than is necessary."

"Then we'll quarter the dose," he said, rubbing his hands. He paused, and calculated for a moment. "We'll have one hundred and ninety-six raisins."

"Do you realise what that involves?" I said. "They'll take hours to prepare."

"What of it!" he cried. "We'll go tomorrow instead. We'll soak the raisins overnight, and then we'll have all the morning and afternoon to get them ready."

And that was precisely what we did.

We had been walking steadily for about forty minutes and we were nearing the point where the lane curved to the right and ran along the crest of the hill towards the big wood where the pheasants lived. There was about a mile to go.

"I don't suppose by any chance these keepers would be carrying guns?" I said.

"All three keepers carry guns," Claud answered.

I had been afraid of that.

"It's for the vermin mostly," he added.

"Ah."

"Of course, there's no guarantee they won't take a pot at a poacher now and again."

"You're joking."

"Not at all. But they only do it from behind—only when

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you're running away. They like to pepper you in the legs at about fifty yards."

"They can't do that!" I cried. "It's a criminal offence."

"So is poaching," Claud said.

We walked on a while in silence. The sun was below the high hedge on our right now, and the lane was in shadow.

"You can consider yourself lucky this isn't thirty years ago," he went on. "They used to shoot you on sight in those days. There wasn't a man in the whole village who didn't have a bit of shot in him. But my dad was the champion. I wish to hell he was here now," Claud said, wistful. "He'd have given anything in the world to be coming with us on this job tonight."

"He could take my place," I said. "Gladly."

We had reached the crest of the hill and now we could see the wood ahead of us, huge and dark, with the sun going down behind the trees and little sparks of gold shining through.

"You'd better let me have those raisins," Claud said.

I gave him the bag, and he slid it gently into a large pocket.

"No talking once we're inside," he said. "Just follow me, and try not to go snapping any branches."

Five minutes later, we were there. The lane ran right up to the wood itself and then skirted the edge of it for about three hundred yards, with only a little hedge between. Claud slipped through the hedge on all fours, and I followed.

It was cool and dark inside the wood. No sunlight came in at all. "This is spooky," I said.

"Sh-h-h!"

Claud was very tense. He was walking just ahead of me, picking his feet up high and putting them down gently on the moist ground. He kept his head moving all the time, the eyes sweeping slowly from side to side, searching for danger. I tried doing the same, but soon I began to see a keeper behind every tree, so I gave it up.

We were now advancing in a series of quick, crouching spurts, running from tree to tree and stopping and waiting and listening and running on again, and then at last we knelt safely behind a big clump of alder, right at the edge of a clearing, and Claud grinned and nudged me in the ribs and pointed through the branches at the pheasants.

The place was absolutely stiff with birds. There must have been two hundred of them at least, strutting among the tree stumps.

"You see what I mean?" Claud whispered.

It was an astonishing sight—a poacher's dream come true.

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And how close they were! Some of them were not more than ten paces from where we were kneeling. The hens were plump and creamy-brown, and so fat that their breast feathers almost brushed the ground as they walked. The cocks were slim and beautiful, with long tails, and brilliant red patches round the eyes like scarlet spectacles.

I glanced at Claud. His big oxlike face was transfigured with ecstasy. The mouth was slightly open, and the eyes had a kind of glazed look about them as they stared at the pheasants.

There was a long pause. The birds made a queer rustling noise as they moved about among the dead leaves in the clearing. "Ah-ha," Claud said softly a minute later. "You see the keeper?"

"Where?"

"Over the other side, standing by that big tree. Look carefully."

We crouched close to the ground, watching the keeper. He was a smallish man with a cap on his head and a gun under one arm. He never moved. He was like a little post standing there.

"Let's go," I whispered.

The keeper's face was in shadow, but it seemed to me that he was looking directly at us.

"I'm not staying here," I said.

"Hush!" Claud said.

Slowly, never taking his eyes from the keeper, he reached into his pocket and brought out a single raisin. He placed it in the palm of his right hand, and then quickly, with a little flick of the wrist, he threw the raisin high into the air. I watched it as it went sailing over the bushes, and I saw it land within a yard or so of two hen birds standing together beside an old tree stump. Both birds turned their heads sharply at the drop of the raisin. Then one of them scurried over and made a quick peck at the ground.

I glanced up at the keeper. He hadn't moved.

Claud threw a second raisin into the clearing; then a third, and a fourth, and a fifth. At this point, I saw the keeper turn his head away to survey the woods behind him. Quick as a flash Claud pulled the paper bag out of his pocket and tipped a huge pile of raisins into the cup of his right hand.

"Stop," I said.

But with a great sweep of the arm he flung the whole handful high over the bushes into the clearing. They fell with a soft little patter, like raindrops on dry leaves, and every single pheasant in the place must have heard them fall. There was a flurry of wings and a rush to find the treasure.

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The keeper's head flicked round as though there was a spring inside his neck. The birds were all pecking away madly at the raisins. The keeper took two quick paces forward, and for a moment I thought he was going to investigate. But then he stopped, and his face came up, and his eyes began travelling slowly round the perimeter of the clearing.

"Follow me," Claud whispered. "And *keep down*." He started crawling away swiftly on all fours, under cover of the bushes. I went after him, and we crawled along like this for about a hundred yards.

"Now run," Claud said.

We got to our feet and ran, and a few minutes later we emerged through the hedge into the lovely open safety of the lane.

"It went marvellous," Claud said, breathing heavily. "Didn't it go absolutely marvellous?" The big face was scarlet and glowing with triumph. "In another five minutes it'll be pitch dark inside the wood, and that keeper will be sloping off home to his supper."

"I think I'll join him," I said.

"You're a great poacher!" Claud said. He sat down on the grassy bank under the hedge and lit a cigarette.

The sun had set now and the sky was a pale smoke-blue, faintly glazed with yellow. In the wood behind us, the shadows and the spaces in between the trees were turning from grey to black.

"How long does a sleeping pill take to work?" Claud asked.

"Look out!" I said. "There's someone coming."

The man had appeared suddenly and silently out of the dusk, and he was only thirty yards away when I saw him.

"Another bloody keeper," Claud said.

We both looked at the keeper as he came down the lane towards us. He had a shotgun under his arm. He stopped when he was a few paces away.

"Good evening," Claud said, nice and friendly.

This one was a tall, bony man of about forty, with a swift eye and a hard cheek and hard, dangerous hands. "I know you," he said softly, coming closer. "I know the both of you."

Claud didn't answer this.

"You're from the garage. Right?" His lips were thin and dry. "You're from the garage on the main road. Right?"

"What are we playing?" Claud said. "Twenty Questions?"

The keeper took a step forward. "Beat it," he said. "Go on. Get out."

Claud sat on the bank, smoking his cigarette and looking at the keeper's feet.

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"Go on," the man said. "Get out."

When he spoke, the upper lip lifted above the gum, and I could see a row of small discoloured teeth, one of them black, the others quince and ochre.

"This happens to be a public highway," Claud said. "Kindly do not molest us."

The keeper shifted the gun from his left arm to his right. "You're loiterin'," he said, "with intent to commit a felony. I could run you in for that."

"No, you couldn't," Claud said.

All this made me rather nervous.

"I've had my eye on you for some time," the keeper said, looking at Claud.

"It's getting late," I said. "Shall we stroll on?"

Claud flipped away his cigarette and got slowly to his feet. "All right," he said. "Let's go."

We wandered off down the lane the way we had come, leaving the keeper standing there.

"That's the head keeper," Claud said. "His name is Rabbetts."

"Let's clear out," I said.

There was a gate on our left leading into a field, and we climbed over it and sat down behind the hedge, waiting for the keeper to walk past us on his way home. A few stars were showing, and a bright three-quarter moon was coming up over the hills behind us.

"Here he is," Claud whispered. "Don't move."

The keeper came loping softly up the lane with his gun on his shoulder, and we watched him through the hedge as he went by.

"He won't be coming back tonight," Claud said.

"How do you know that?"

"A keeper never waits for you in the wood if he knows where you live. He goes to your house if he's keeping an eye on you, and hides outside and watches for you to come back."

"What about the other one—the one in the clearing?"

"He's gone, too."

"You can't be sure of that."

"I've been studying these bastards for months, Gordon. Honest I have. I know all their habits. There's no danger."

A few minutes later, I reluctantly followed Claud back into the wood. It was pitch dark in there now, and very silent, and as we moved cautiously forward, the noise of our footsteps seemed to go echoing round the walls of the forest as though we were walking in a cathedral.

"Here's where we threw the raisins," Claud said.

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I peered through the bushes. The clearing lay dim and milky in the moonlight.

"You're quite sure the keeper's gone?"

"I *know* he's gone."

I could just see Claud's face under the peak of his cap—the pale lips, the soft, pale cheeks, and the large eyes with a little spark of excitement dancing in each.

"Are they roosting?" I asked.

"Yes. In the branches."

"Whereabouts?"

"All round. They don't go far."

"What do we do next?"

"We stay here and wait. I brought you a light," he added, and he handed me one of those small pocket torches like a fountain pen. "You may need it."

I was beginning to feel better.

"Shall we see if we can spot some of them sitting in the trees?" I said.

"No."

"I should like to see how they look when they're roosting."

"This isn't a nature ramble," Claud said. "Please be quiet."

We stood there for a long time, waiting for something to happen. "I've just had a nasty thought," I said. "If a bird can keep its balance on a branch when it's asleep, then surely there isn't any reason why the pills should make it fall down."

Claud looked at me quickly.

"After all," I said, "it's not dead. It's only sleeping."

"It's doped," Claud said.

"But that's just a deeper sort of sleep. Why should we expect it to fall down just because it's in a deeper sleep?"

There was a gloomy silence.

"We should've tried it out with chickens," Claud said. "My dad would've done that."

"Your dad was a genius," I said.

At that moment, there came a soft thump from the wood behind us. "Hey!" I said.

"Sh-h-h!"

We stood listening.

Thump!

"There's another!"

It was a deep, muffled sound, as though a small bag of sand had been dropped from about shoulder height.

Thump!

"They're pheasants!" I cried.

"Wait."

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"I'm sure they're pheasants."

Thump! Thump!

"You're right!"

We ran back into the wood. "Where were they?" I asked.

"Over here. Two of them were over here!"

"I thought they were this way."

"Keep looking!" Claud shouted. "They can't be far."

We searched for about a minute.

"Here's one," he called.

When I got to him, he was holding a magnificent cock bird in both hands. We examined it closely with our torches.

"It's still alive," Claud said. "I can feel its heart, but it's doped to the gills."

Thump!

"There's another!" he cried.

Thump! Thump!

"Two more!"

Thump!

Thump! Thump! Thump!

"Heavens above!"

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

Thump! Thump!

All round us, the pheasants were starting to rain down out of the trees. We began rushing about madly in the dark, sweeping the ground with our torches.

Thump! Thump! Thump! This lot fell almost on top of me. I was right under the tree as they came down, and I found all three of them immediately—two cocks and a hen. They were limp and warm, the feathers wonderfully soft in the hand.

"Where shall I put them?" I called out. I was holding them by the legs.

"Lay them here, Gordon. Just pile them up here where it's light."

Claud was standing on the edge of the clearing with the moonlight streaming down all over him and a great bunch of pheasants in each hand. His face was bright, his eyes big and bright and wonderful, and he was staring about him like a child who has just discovered that the whole world is made of chocolate.

Thump!

Thump! Thump!

"I don't like it," I said. "It's too many."

"It's beautiful!" he cried, and he dumped the birds he was carrying and ran off to look for more.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Thump!

Thump!

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It was easy to find them now. There were one or two lying under every tree. I quickly collected six more, three in each hand, and ran back and dumped them with the others. Then six more. Then six more after that. And still they kept falling.

Claud was in a whirl of ecstasy, dashing about like a mad ghost under the trees. I could see the beam of his torch waving in the dark, and each time he found a bird he gave a little yelp of triumph.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

"Mr. Victor Hazel ought to hear this," he called out.

"Don't shout," I said. "It frightens me."

"What?"

"Don't *shout*. There might be keepers."

"To hell with the keepers!" he cried. "They're all eating."

For three or four minutes the pheasants kept on falling. Then suddenly they stopped. "Keep searching!" Claud shouted. "There's plenty more on the ground."

"Don't you think we ought to get out while the going's good?"

"No," he said.

We went on searching. Between us, we looked under every tree within a hundred yards of the clearing—north, south, east, and west—and I think we found most of them in the end. At the collecting point there was a pile of pheasants as big as a bonfire.

"It's a miracle," Claud said. "It's a bloody miracle." He was staring at them in a kind of trance.

"We'd better just take half a dozen each and get out quick," I said.

Claud began counting them very carefully, picking up each bird in turn and laying it gently to one side. The moon was overhead now, and the whole clearing was brilliantly illuminated.

"I'm not standing here like this," I said. I walked back a few paces and hid myself in the shadows, waiting for him to finish.

"A hundred and seventeen, a hundred and eighteen, a hundred and nineteen, a hundred and twenty," he cried. "One hundred and twenty birds! It's an all-time record!"

I didn't doubt it for a moment.

"The most my dad ever got in one night was fifteen, and he was drunk for a week afterwards!"

"You're the champion of the world," I said. "Are you ready now?"

"One minute," he answered, and he pulled up his sweater and began to unwind the two big, white cotton sacks from round his belly. "Here's yours," he said, handing one of them to me. "Fill it up quick."

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The light of the moon was so strong that I could read the small print along the base of the sack.

"You don't think that brute with the brown teeth is keeping an eye on us this very moment from behind a tree?"

"There's no chance of that," Claud said. "He's down at the garage, like I told you, watching for us to come home."

We started loading the pheasants into the sacks. They were soft and floppy-necked, and the skin underneath the feathers was warm.

"There'll be a taxi waiting for us in the lane," Claud said.

"What?"

"I always go back in a taxi, Gordon. Didn't you know that? A taxi is anonymous. Nobody knows who's inside a taxi except the driver. My dad taught me that."

"Which driver?"

"Charlie Kinch. He's only too glad to oblige."

We finished loading the pheasants, and I tried to hump my bulging sack on to my shoulder. My sack had about sixty birds inside it, and it must have weighed a hundredweight and a half, at least. "I can't carry this," I said. "We'll have to leave some of them behind."

"Drag it," Claud said. "Just pull it behind you."

We started off through the pitch-black woods, pulling the pheasants behind us. "We'll never make it all the way back to the village like this," I said.

"Charlie's never let me down yet," Claud said.

We came to the margin of the wood and peered through the hedge into the lane. The taxi was there, not five yards away. Claud said, "Charlie boy," very softly, and the old man behind the wheel poked his head out into the moonlight and gave us a sly, toothless grin. We slid through the hedge, dragging the sacks after us.

"Hullo!" Charlie said. "What's this?"

"It's cabbages," Claud told him. "Open the door."

Two minutes later we were safely inside the taxi, cruising slowly down the hill towards the village.

It was all over now bar the shouting. Claud was triumphant, bursting with pride and excitement, and he kept leaning forward and tapping Charlie Kinch on the shoulder and saying, "How about it, Charlie? How about this for a haul?"

Charlie kept glancing back popeyed at the huge, bulging sacks lying on the floor between us and saying, "How did you do it?"

"There's six brace of them for you, Charlie," Claud said.

Charlie said, "I reckon that pheasants is going to be a bit

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scarce up at Mr. Victor Hazel's opening-day shoot this year."

Claud said, " I imagine they are, Charlie, I imagine they are."

" What in heaven's name are you going to do with a hundred and twenty pheasants? " I asked.

" Put them in cold storage for the winter," Claud said. " Put them in with the dog meat in the deep-freeze at the garage."

" Not tonight, I trust? "

" No, Gordon. We leave them at Bessie's house tonight."

" Bessie who? "

" Bessie Organ."

" Bessie *Organ!* " I was completely stunned. Mrs. Organ was housekeeper to the vicar.

" Bessie always delivers my game, didn't you know that? "

" I don't know anything," I said.

" Always choose a respectable woman to deliver your game," Claud announced. " That's correct, Charlie, isn't it? "

" Bessie's a right smart girl," Charlie said. " Don't reckon she'll be a widow much longer."

We were driving through the village now and the street lamps were still on and the men were wandering home from the pubs. I saw Will Prattley letting himself in quietly by the side door of his fishmonger's shop, and Mrs. Prattley's head was sticking out of the window just above him, but he didn't know it.

" The vicar is very partial to roast pheasant," Claud said.

" He hangs it eighteen days," Charlie said. " Then he gives it a couple of good shakes and all the feathers drop off."

The taxi turned left and swung in through the gates of the vicarage. There were no lights on in the house, and nobody met us. Claud and I dumped the pheasants in the coal shed at the rear, and then we said good-bye to Charlie Kinch and walked back in the moonlight to the garage, empty-handed. Whether or not Mr. Rabbetts was watching us as we went in, I do not know. We saw no sign of him.

" Here she comes," Claud said to me the next morning. He was looking through the window of the garage.

" Who? "

" Bessie—Bessie Organ." He spoke the name proudly and with a slight proprietary air.

I followed him outside.

" Down there," he said, pointing.

Far away down the road, I could see a small female figure advancing towards us. " What's she pushing? " I asked.

Claud gave me a sly look. " There's only one safe way of delivering game," he announced, " and that's under a baby."

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"Yes," I murmured. "Yes, of course."

"That'll be young Christopher Organ in the pram, aged one and a half. He's a lovely child, Gordon."

I could just make out the small dot of a baby sitting high up in the large pram, which had its hood folded down.

"There's sixty or seventy pheasants at least under that little nipper," Claud said happily.

"You can't fit sixty or seventy pheasants into a pram," I said.

"You can if it's got a good deep well underneath it, and if you take out the mattress and pack them in tight, right up to the top. All you need then is a sheet. You'll be surprised how little room a pheasant takes up when it's limp."

We stood beside the pumps, waiting for Bessie Organ to arrive. It was one of those warm, windless September mornings, with a darkening sky and a smell of thunder in the air.

"Right through the village, bold as brass," Claud said. "Good old Bessie."

"She seems in rather a hurry to me."

Claud lit a new cigarette from the stub of the old one. "Bessie is never in a hurry," he said.

"She certainly isn't walking normal," I told him. "You look."

He squinted rather through the smoke of his cigarette. Then he took the cigarette out of his mouth and looked again.

"Well?" I said.

"She does seem to be going a tiny bit quick, doesn't she?" he said carefully.

"She's going damn quick."

There was a pause. Claud was beginning to stare hard at the approaching woman. "Perhaps she doesn't want to be caught in the rain, Gordon. I'll bet that's exactly what it is—she thinks it's going to rain, and she don't want the baby to get wet."

"She's running!" I cried. "Look!"

Bessie had broken suddenly into a full sprint.

Claud stood very still, watching the woman; and in the silence that followed I fancied I could hear a baby screaming.

"There's something wrong with that baby," I said.

The small shrill voice in the distance was growing louder every second—frantic, piercing, almost hysterical.

"He's having a fit," Claud announced.

"I think he must be."

"That's why she's running, Gordon. She wants to get him in here quick and put him under a cold tap."

"I'm sure you're right," I said.

Claud shifted his feet uneasily on the gravel of the driveway.

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"There's a thousand and one different things keep happening every day to little babies like that," he said.

"Of course."

"Whatever it is," Claud said, "I wish to goodness she'd stop running."

A huge lorry loaded with bricks came up alongside Bessie, and the driver slowed down and poked his head out through the window to stare. Bessie flew on, and she was so close now that I could see her big, red face, with the mouth wide open, panting for breath. I noticed she was wearing white gloves on her hands, very prim and dainty, and there was a funny little white hat to match perched like a mushroom on the top of her head.

Suddenly, out of the pram, straight up into the air, flew an enormous pheasant.

Claud let out a cry of horror.

The fool in the truck going along beside Bessie roared with laughter. The pheasant flapped around drunkenly for a few seconds, then it lost height and landed in the grass by the side of the road. Bessie kept on running.

Then—*whoosh!*—a second pheasant flew up out of the pram.

Then a third and a fourth. Then a fifth.

"Claud," I shouted, "it's the pills. They're wearing off."

Bessie covered the last fifty yards at a tremendous pace, and she came swinging into the drive of the garage with birds flying up out of the pram in all directions.

"Whatever's going on?" she cried.

"Go round the back!" I shouted. "Go round the back!" But she pulled up sharp beside the first pump in the line and, before we could reach her, she seized the screaming infant in her arms and dragged him clear.

"No! No!" Claud cried, racing towards her. "Don't lift the baby. Put him back. Hold down the sheet!" But she wasn't even listening and, with the weight of the child suddenly lifted away, a great cloud of pheasants rose up out of the pram—forty or fifty of them, at least—and the whole sky above us was filled with huge brown birds clapping their wings furiously to gain height.

Claud and I started running up and down the drive, waving our arms to frighten them off the premises. "Go away!" we shouted. "Shoo! Go away!"

But they were still too dopey to take any notice of us, and within half a minute down they came again and settled themselves like a swarm of locusts all over the front of my garage.

The place was covered with them. They sat wing to wing along the edges of the roof and on the concrete canopy that came

Continued on page 86

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MARY STEWART

My Brother Michael

Tense summer adventure.
Beauty and danger highlit
by dazzling Greek sun against
a dark background of violence

Her enthralling new novel
in next month's

ARGOSY

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out over the pumps, and a dozen, at least, were clinging to the sill of the office window. Some had flown down on the rack that held the bottles of lubricating oil, and others were sliding about on the bonnets of my secondhand cars. One cock bird with a fine tail was perched superbly on top of a petrol pump, and quite a number simply squatted in the drive at our feet, fluffing their feathers and blinking their small eyes.

Across the road, a line of cars had already started forming behind the brick-lorry, and people were opening their doors and getting out and beginning to cross over to have a closer look.

I glanced at my watch. It was twenty to nine. Any moment now, I thought, a large black car is going to come streaking along the road from the direction of the village, and the car will be a Rolls, and the face behind the wheel will be the great brewer's face of Mr. Victor Hazel.

"They near pecked him to pieces!" Bessie was shouting, clasping the screaming baby to her bosom.

"You go on home, Bessie," Claud said, white in the face.

"Lock up," I said. "Put out the sign. We've gone for the day."

★ ★ ★

GOOSEBERRY FOOL

There's no fool like an old fool, but gooseberries are proverbially green, so, young or old, here's a chance for you to prove your wisdom by whipping through our bowlful of brain-teasers without shedding a pip. Solutions on page 143.

1. *Is a palfrey*
   - *i. a fish;*
   - *ii. an ecclesiastical chamber for storing palls;*
   - *iii. a horse?*
2. *What does double demy mean?*
3. *Whose are these last words:*
   - *i.* "*Light! More light!*"
   - *ii.* "*Monks! Monks! Monks!*"
   - *iii.* "*Give Dayrolles a chair.*"
4. *Who is known as the Duchess of Normandy?*
5. *Why are leases often made out for* 99 *rather than* 100 *years?*
6. *What do the letters N and M in the publication of banns stand for?*
7. *When is "the big gooseberry season?"*

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TALL MAN RIDING

" A girl can tell these things," Annunziata said

BY FRANCIS FYTTON

THAT spring morning, as the African sun burnt the mist off the mountains, a tall man came into the valley riding a great horse.

Annunziata Bianchi saw him first. She was just twenty-one and the most beautiful girl between Asmara and Adi Caieh; but since the war there had been no young men to witness her beauty.

The girl was taking her father's lean brown cattle down to the river when, somewhere high up in the mist on the precipitous far bank, a stone was dislodged. That stone set others rolling, and a small landslide came splashing into the water. The cattle, lowing with fear, quit the river for the security of their own bank.

Annunziata heard something charging down out of the mist and was sure it must be a lion. Lions in Eritrea are lean, and they become incredibly fast and ferocious but, even so, they are reluctant to charge through water. So the girl, who was of Italian origin but a child of Africa, picked up a stone and waited. A good blow on the head with a stone would discourage the lion. Unless it became infuriated. Or was very hungry.

Then the last coil of mist parted to reveal a tall man riding a great horse, coming down the slope in a wild rush, braked only by the giant haunches of the horse. The rider did not pause at the bank, but slithered into the water and forded his way to mid-stream before he saw the girl and reined in his beast.

His first words were addressed to the horse. " The lady doesn't like the look of us, Paddy," he said, patting the swelling muscles of the animal's neck, which was straining down to the water. " Hullo, there, signorina. Do we look as bad as that? "

The tall man swept off his limp bush hat to reveal long, flaxen hair that fell in an unkempt flurry to the nape of his neck. He wore a beard of a deeper shade, more golden than his hair. It had obviously once been pointed, but was now rather shaggy. He spoke Italian, fluent and flowing, with a trace of accent.

Annunziata dropped the stone.

" I thought you might be a lion." She looked him up and

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down, not concealing her interest, and added, "You look like a lion." She began to laugh.

"And you," the tall man said, "look like a water nymph in a mirage. I've seen several mirages in the past few days, but none of them had a water nymph. I looked very carefully to make sure."

He switched his remarks to the horse again. "Drink your fill, Paddy, my darling horse, for you've earned every drop of it."

He scooped up the river-water with his hat until it was overflowing the brim and suddenly replaced it on his head. The water streamed down his tawny face, making rivulets through the beard, and soaked his shirt to the skin. He shook himself slowly, revelling in the ecstasy of contact with cold water.

Then he unclipped his water-bottle and began to drink sparingly from the cup. His method of drinking was in startling contrast to his previous behaviour, but Annunziata understood: the man had been denying himself water for the horse and was afraid to drink too much too soon. The only waterless route to the valley lay across the frontier from the Sudan.

"Have you come far?" she asked.

"As far as I intend to travel for a few days," the tall man said. "I'll camp here if I may."

"You must ask my father," the girl said. "I'll take you to him when the cattle are watered."

The tall man rode his horse out of the stream and dismounted beside her. He produced a big, brown, corncob pipe and charged it from a tin of tobacco. The tobacco was very dry, flaring readily to his match. The man dashed a little more river-water in his face before settling the pipe in his mouth.

"Do you fear a forest fire?" Annunziata asked, laughing at him again.

"Yes," the tall man told her very seriously. "When a man's as dry as I am, he's like tinder to a flame. I haven't dared smoke for a week."

"Perhaps I should build a fire against lions," Annunziata said half humorously. "A lion might charge through the water, but not through water *and* fire."

"Are those stones to keep away lions?" the tall man asked, pointing to a little cairn she had made beside the river.

"Of course."

"Have you no gun?"

"We are too poor for guns such as that," Annunziata said, pointing to an express rifle that hung from the saddle of the great horse. "A shotgun only provokes a lion into charging. Lions have a strong sense of dignity; they would rather retreat than be stoned across a river."

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"All of them?"

"All that I have met."

"Have you no brothers to do this work?"

"My brothers were killed in the war."

The tall man hesitated, and Annunziata saw that behind the deceptively-slow, grey eyes he was wondering why her father did not come to the river.

She did not trouble to tell him, knowing the unspoken question would soon be answered.

Papa Bianchi was sitting on the verandah of the farmhouse that lay at the head of the valley before the foothills as though in the hollow of a giant's hand. A rug lay over the lower half of his body. He was giving instructions in Amharic to a slight, wire-haired, Eritrean boy of about twelve.

The tall man introduced himself as Miles Robinson, and said he was English.

Papa apologised for not getting up.

"You are ill, Signor Bianchi?" Robinson asked, without enthusiasm.

"I have no legs," Papa said.

"It was the lion who killed my father," the Eritrean boy informed him.

"That is right, Kifle," Papa said. "Your father died trying to save me. A shotgun and a spear are not the best weapons with which to fight lions."

"Or stones," Robinson suggested. He winced as he said this, for Annunziata had brought one of her primitive sandals into sudden contact with his ankle.

"Stones?" said Papa questioningly. "I do not understand this talk of stones."

"I believe herdsmen sometimes throw stones at lions to discourage them," Robinson said.

"Yes, I have heard that," Papa said. "But I do not believe it. I think they would run away if they saw a lion. But there are no lions within a hundred miles of the valley nowadays. After my accident the government sent their askaris on a great hunt, and killed or drove them all away."

"It must be a great consolation to you," Robinson said.

"It is. Otherwise I could not continue to farm with just my daughter and Kifle, who is now as a son. A farm like this needs a man—an active man."

"Have you no neighbours to lend a hand?" Robinson asked.

"Not since the war. Most of the young Italians went to Australia after Eritrea became part of Ethiopia. People want to get rich quickly nowadays. No one has the patience to farm a

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place so remote, though the soil is good. But enough of my troubles. What can I do for you?"

"Allow me to camp by the river for a week," Robinson said. "I will pay you well for it."

"There is no difficulty about that," Papa said. "But I must know what business you have in the valley."

"I am a geologist on a working holiday," Robinson said. "I want to survey the rock outcrops." Robinson seldom told lies; he always found it served his purpose to tell a part of the truth. He was glad he had done so now, for when Papa questioned him, exhibiting a surprising knowledge of the rock formation, Robinson was able to satisfy the old man, for he was truly a geologist.

He spent the day unpacking and assembling a variety of equipment and setting up camp by the river. That night he dreamt of the purpose for which he had come to the valley; and he dreamt also of Annunziata. She was throwing pebbles across the river at a lion which swallowed them. The pebbles were made of gold.

Perhaps the second dream was prompted by the coughing roar of a real cat. For that night a lion did come to the valley. He invaded the cattle pen, killing a heifer and dragging the body through the rails and down to the river. He had tried to drag the body through the water, but the current was too swift for his strength. So he dragged the carcass back into shallow water. There he gorged himself before crossing the river and climbing the hillside to sleep.

In the morning, Kifle showed Annunziata fresh pugmarks on both sides of the river. He did not have to point out that for the first time there had come to the valley a lion that was not afraid of water.

Papa Bianchi sent his daughter to fetch Robinson, for a lion was something that concerned them all. Although he knew the lion would be sleeping off his meal, he warned her not to cross the river. Robinson's camp, however, was deserted save for the horse so Annunziata crossed the river and went in search of him.

She found the Englishman under the shadow of a cliff. He was walking slowly forward, swinging an instrument like an antique bedwarming-pan to and fro across his path.

Annunziata told him of the lion who was not afraid of water, and he began to dismantle and fold away in a pack the oddly-shaped instrument.

"I suppose you know that this is a geiger counter," Robinson told Annunziata. "It is used for surveying mineral deposits."

Annunziata had taken off her working apron before leaving the

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farmhouse, and brushed her black hair until it shone with a liquid lustre, but she was conscious that the long walk in the sun had undone her work, and that she was hot and dishevelled. She said sharply, "I know it is nothing of the sort."

"What do you mean?"

"It is a detector such as I saw the soldiers use after the war. It is for locating buried metal."

"So you are intelligent as well as brave and beautiful," Robinson said.

But Annunziata had already turned back for the farm, setting a pace that made Robinson sweat under his equipment.

"I will have to send for the government askaris to kill the lion," Papa said. "Perhaps you wish to leave before they come?"

"There will be no need of askaris to do the shooting," Robinson said.

"Will you slay him yourself?" Kifle asked. "I will track him down for you. I am very skilled in the reading of pugmarks."

"There will be no need for any shooting," Robinson said. "I will pay you twice the price you name for your heifer and for all other damage the lion may do at the same rate. I will do this until my business in the valley is finished, and then you may send for the askaris and rid yourselves of the lion."

"There is no need to follow the lion," Kifle said, trying to hide his disappointment. "I know that is a matter for a skilled hunter. But we could trap him tonight when he returns to his kill. He must cross the water where the cattle drink, for there the bank is low and the water shallow. We can wait on this bank and you can kill him as he struggles through the water. There will be no danger. I will make a great barrier of thorns from which you can shoot."

"You will do that, won't you?" Annunziata said.

"I want no shooting," Robinson said. "A shot would echo down the valley and be heard at the police post where the valley joins the road. They would know it was from a rifle and come to investigate. It is some acoustic trick of the mountains."

"How can you know this about the valley?" Papa asked.

"He has been here before," Annunziata said.

"Yes, I have been here in the war, carrying funds to finance a revolt among the Eritreans against the government. One of my sentries fired a shot, which betrayed us to the police post and we were taken to prison."

"What has this to do with the lion?" Papa asked.

"He has come back to steal the money," Annunziata said.

"The money is mine," Robinson said. "Twenty thousand pounds in gold bars that I risked my neck to bring across the

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desert and the mountains from Khartoum. I buried it before I was captured; so it was written off. I am entitled to that money if anyone is. I've saved for seventeen years to come back and get it, and no lion's going to stop me. I'm going to have it—if I have to lock you all up until I've found where I buried it."

"There will be no need for that," Papa said. "You have a horse and a rifle: we are in your hands. But the business of the farm must go on, and neither my daughter nor the boy can go to the river unprotected with the lion at large."

"I'll make a bargain with you," Robinson said. "I'll need you to stable my horse and keep him in good condition to carry the gold back across the mountains. I brought a horse instead of a mule train, because a horse attracts less attention. I bought that horse in Ireland and shipped him out here. He's as strong as an elephant, and I don't want him grazing with a lion on the prowl.

"You look after my horse and I'll protect your daughter, even if it means taking a chance on the gold and shooting the lion. How's that?"

Papa hesitated, but Annunziata intervened, "It seems we have no choice. I accept your gallant offer."

"He is a coward," Kifle said. "He is afraid of the lion."

So each morning for four successive mornings, Robinson took his express rifle, and went down to the river with the girl, and amused himself by throwing her pile of stones into the stream while the cattle drank. Then he would go up the slopes with his detector to search for the gold bars.

Annunziata held scrupulously to her part of the bargain, keeping the horse well fed and grooming him herself. Because she could not get her tongue round the name Paddy, she re-named the horse "Grande," meaning great and, in a sense, noble. When he heard the name, Kifle said ironically, "What a pity the man is less noble than the horse," and was surprised to receive a box on the ear. Perhaps Annunziata was a little ashamed of her outburst, for she made the boy a special risotto for supper that night.

The fifth morning, Robinson was late, and Annunziata went to the river with Kifle. The lion had killed another calf that night and she knew he would be lying, gorged, somewhere beyond the river. They saw Robinson come riding down to the river with his saddle-bags loaded.

"So you have found the gold and now you are going you do not feel any need to keep the bargain," the girl said.

"I said he was a coward," Kifle answered. "The gold has made him a coward."

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" I have to get the horse loaded and, as for the bargain, I've just paid your father more than this farm makes in a year," Robinson snapped.

" Is that how you live with your conscience, Captain McGowan."

" How did you know my name? "

" This valley is a very small place. Kifle's father was one of the rebels to whom you were to deliver the gold."

McGowan said to the boy, " Boy, I shall give you what would have been your father's share of the gold. With that, you can buy a real rifle and protect the farm."

" It would not shoot straight," Kifle said. " I do not need gold to make believe I am a man."

" Kifle, take the mule and fetch the askaris for the lion," Annunziata said. " We shall need them now that Captain McGowan is withdrawing his protection."

" I will stay with you until the cattle are watered," McGowan said.

" You had better go before the askaris catch you."

" My horse is strong. Strong enough to carry us both over the mountains."

" If I had been going with you, I should have made preparation," Annunziata said.

" Did you know I should ask you? "

" Of course," Annunziata said. " Did you think a girl cannot tell that there are things . . ."

" Listen," McGowan said, " you're everything I've ever admired in a woman. I love you. I will marry you. Does that make any difference? "

" It is to you that it should make the difference," Annunziata said.

" I've waited seventeen years for this money," Robinson said. " You can't expect a man to throw away a fortune and seventeen years of his life."

" In this valley I have learnt to expect nothing but lions," Annunziata said. She was paddling barefoot in the river, picking out large round pebbles.

" Why are you doing that? "

" For the lion."

" The askaris will kill the lion."

" There will be other lions."

" Then why do you stay? "

" Because I love this valley and my father has given his life to it. It is very beautiful. If you had not been grubbing about in the earth, you would have seen its beauty."

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McGowan looked from the deep green grass to the high blue mountains: looked unwillingly, yet unable to help himself, for it was an Africa he had never noticed before.

"It's money I need, not land," McGowan said. As if in obedience to his rider's mood, the big horse started forward, and McGowan dug his heels in hard so that they foamed across the river. McGowan did not look back and presently they were lost to sight in the brush.

It was late that afternoon, while Annunziata was milking the cows, that she heard the shots.

Setting down the pail, she went to the river. As she had expected, the tall man was fording it with his horse. In place of the saddle-bags, the tawny carcass of a lion was tied behind the saddle.

"I have taken the gold to the police post. Now all I have is a dead lion," McGowan said.

"Have you no prospects?" Annunziata asked.

"Your father said he needed a man on the farm."

"My adopted brother does not like you," Annunziata said.

"He will forgive me for killing the lion," McGowan said. "We can ask him when he gets back from the police post."

"He has not been to the police post," Annunziata said. "When I saw you angry this morning, I told him it would not be necessary."

"How did you know I would come back?" McGowan shouted.

"A girl can tell these things," Annunziata said . . .

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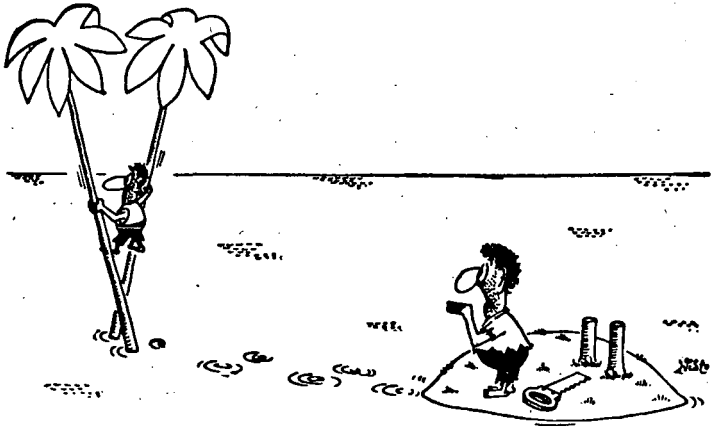

"Well, bon voyage, Harry."

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FINISHING TOUCH

He'd worked at it for years
adding a buttress here, a portcullis there

BY ANDREW GRAHAM

SOME years ago, when it looked as if cinemas were all going to be equipped to show three-dimensional films, I wrote an illustrated article on those forerunners of the stereoscopic camera, the artists and craftsmen who at various times had set out not only to delight, but specifically to deceive the eye: painters of what are generally known as trompe l'œil pictures.

I got hold of photographs of the murals by Veronese round the hall of a villa in Tuscany where, as you enter, it is almost impossible to believe that the balustrade of the gallery and the figures leaning over it are, in fact, as flat as a pancake on the wall and not, as they appear to be, of flesh and blood and marble.

Then I showed some of the fascinating perspective scenery done by Charles and Emile Leduc for Louis XV in the theatre of the château at Cheux-le-Roy; and just for a lark I included a photograph of Jan Bogaert's lifesize picture of a horse's head looking out over a stable door, which is painted with such diabolical skill that you really do begin to fumble for a carrot or a lump of sugar when you see it for the first time. It's in a museum at Antwerp and it has a little room all to itself—or it had when I last saw it.

When I came down to the moderns, I wanted to show just one or two examples of the work of our own native painter, Alfred Linden, but I didn't know where to start looking for it.

Alfred was a picturesque character. He used to come to Oxford when I was there. I can see him now, swirling down the High in his long black cloak; it would be silly to pretend that he was a great artist; he was—which is perhaps the next best thing—a consummate craftsman. Also he was a rich man, so he could afford to indulge in eccentricities; and his painting was about as eccentric as anything I've ever seen.

He once decorated a room in a Park Lane penthouse in which the panelling, the picture-frames, the stuffed pike in a glass case, the books and the bookcases, the niches, and the statues in them, were painted straight on to the walls. You got the same feeling

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when you came out as you do after a visit to Madame Tussaud's. You hesitate to address the policeman in case he turns out not to be a real policeman after all.

I don't think Alfred Linden ever held an exhibition of his paintings, and since nearly all his work consisted of murals in private houses, he was almost unknown to the general public. He died as a comparatively young man when a bomb fell on him and his studio in 1940.

If only, I thought to myself, I could photograph one or two of his paintings, how perfectly they would fit in.

And then—I don't know why these coincidences happen, but they do—I found myself lunching with a Bond Street art dealer who had been at Oxford with me, who had known Alfred Linden well, and who had kept up with him till his death.

"But, of course," he said, "what a good idea! Do give old Alfred a write-up. He had such talent, you know, and he was just beginning to paint seriously when he died."

"But where can I see his paintings?" I said.

My companion thought for a moment.

"Well," he said, "so much of his stuff perished when he did, when the bomb fell in Charlotte Street. The ideal thing—if you could get in—would be to go to his old home. It's called Sillington or Willington or some such name—I can look up the address. You can see the house as you go up the Great North Road.

"His old mum still lives there, but I believe she keeps all the pictures locked up. I'll give you a letter to her if you like. It would be worth trying."

A few days later, armed with a letter of introduction to Mrs. Henry Linden, Willington Grange, near Grantham, I set off up the Great North Road. I realised that I'd got to play this one rather carefully. It was obviously important not to upset the old lady in any way; but on the other hand I wanted to make it as difficult as possible for her to refuse my request. So I took a room at the village pub and posted my letter of introduction with a covering note saying that I had known Alfred, that I sought to do him honour, and had come to the neighbourhood in the hope of being allowed to see some of his pictures.

At about eleven o'clock the next morning, an aged man appeared with a note for me which looked as if it had been written by a very determined spider on thick writing-paper which was mottled like a blackbird's egg. It invited me to luncheon that day. I sent back a reply, by hand of the aged man, that I was delighted to accept.

The house, a sizeable one by any standards, had been built on the flood tide of Victorian prosperity and on a ground-plan like a

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capital E. I noticed that the wing to the right was shuttered.

I heaved at a great wrought-iron bell-pull, and a particularly good, crumbly old butler let me in and led me to the drawing-room—the ground floor of the wing which I had seen on the left.

The clock under its glass dome, the ferns and the fuchsias in the jardinière, the watercolours in their four-inch gilt mounts, the tasselled fringes, and the absence of ashtrays took me straight back to the drawing-rooms of my great-aunts when I was a little boy, and Mrs. Linden completed the picture.

Nowadays one is so accustomed to old ladies of eighty who do their own housework, bumble about the neighbourhood in bubble cars, and spend the evening of life baby-sitting, that it was a rare pleasure, like sampling a wine of ancient vintage, to shake the beringed hand of this splendid old number, complete with curly fringe of false hair—weren't they called transformations?—lace altar-frontal held up round the neck by whalebone, locket on black watered silk ribbon, and lace cuffs.

Luncheon, from the pale sherry to the peaches, was excellent. Ah me! the feel of that white, well-padded tablecloth, the quality of the cut glass and the china, and the sheer tonnage of silver on the sideboard!

And throughout its many courses Mrs. Linden talked with the keenest intelligence and in the most downright manner about national and international affairs. Then we went back to the drawing-room. So far there had been no mention of Alfred, and not a glimpse of any of his pictures.

When the butler had brought us our coffee and withdrawn, I tentatively steered the conversation to the reason for my visit.

And then the strange story came out: strange because in every respect Mrs. Linden was such a crisp, businesslike old lady.

On the day of her son's death, she said—and it must have been just about the time when he actually died—she had had the most curiously unnerving experience which she had never been able to get completely out of her mind. And though the explanation of what she had seen was only too ludicrously simple, yet, even after all these years, she didn't want ever to be reminded of it again.

Not unnaturally, I felt rather diffident about pressing for further details.

"It was that same evening," she said, "after I had heard the news, that I had all Alfred's pictures taken down and stored in his studio, over there." She pointed at the shuttered wing.

"I've had it kept dusted and cleaned," she said, "but—" she spoke very slowly—"since that dreadful afternoon, I've never been in there myself."

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"Perhaps," I said gently, "you'd rather. . ." but before I could complete the sentence she was back again, with an almost audible click, on the extremely businesslike conversational form which she had shown at luncheon.

"No," she said, "that'd be silly. You've come all this way to do Alfred honour, and there's no reason whatever why you shouldn't see the pictures, and photograph them if you want to; but I won't come with you. I'll tell you why. I've never told anyone before, but I think you'll understand."

She paused, as if to gather up her thoughts, and then went on in the same dry, factual way.

"My son died on the twenty-first of September 1940; and if he'd only done as he said he was goin' to do and left London that morning, he might have been alive today. But that's neither here nor there. I got a letter from him sayin' he was comin' here, and meant to be with me in time for luncheon. He said the blitz was gettin' on his nerves and he wanted to come and paint here, in the peace of the country. Particularly, he said, he wanted to put the finishing touches to *The Castle of Dreams*."

I interrupted, "The Castle of Dreams?"

"It was the last big thing he ever painted. You'll see it presently. It's a mural coverin' all the far end of the studio: a vast picture; just the sort of thing Alfred liked doin' best. You can see the castle itself at the top with its turrets and battlements, and then all down the mountainside—the castle itself, of course, is on a peak—you can see the steps cut in the rock. You remember how good he was at perspective effects?"

"I do indeed," I said.

"Eventually the stairway broadens out and you come to the bottom step which for all the world looks as if it's not in the picture, but right in the studio itself."

"It sounds fascinating," I said.

"Yes," she said pensively, "yes, it is. It's absolutely typical of Alfred. He loved that picture. He'd been workin' on it for years, addin' a buttress here or a portcullis there, or puttin' in another group of figures. He was for ever fiddlin' at it. There was always something new, every time I went to look."

Again she paused.

"Well, anyhow," she said, "my son was never a very punctual person, you know, so I wasn't surprised when he didn't arrive for luncheon; but by about half past three—I was sittin' in here—I began to feel uneasy. I had a sort of—what d'you call it?—a frisson, a sort of cold, shivery feeling.

"Then I thought I heard the front door open and I went out into the hall and it *was* open. I suppose the wind must have

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blown it. Perhaps that's why I was shivering. So I shut it; and then for no special reason—because I didn't usually go there when he was away: it was his sanctum, you see—I went on down the hall to the studio. The door was open, and there, with his back to me, at the far end of the room, was my son, in that black cloak he used to wear."

She stopped speaking for a moment, and I stared hard at my knees and did my best not to let my eyebrows go up with incredulity.

The old lady went on, "And I remember the enormous feeling of relief that came over me that he was there and safe; and at the same time I was cross because he hadn't been in to see me when he arrived.

"And then—" she faltered, and I could see her right hand gripping a lace handkerchief very tight—"then I realised."

"I don't follow," I said. "I'm sorry to be so dense, but I don't see what you realised."

"Don't you understand?" she said. "I wasn't lookin' at Alfred at all. I was lookin' at a figure in the picture, a figure in a long black cloak with its foot on the first step of the stairway."

My first reaction was one of complete anticlimax. And then I thought to myself, If I can get a photograph of a painted figure which is so realistic that it deceived even the artist's own mother, I shall have something very well worth having.

"Then," said the old lady, "just as I realised what a stupid fool I'd been, the telephone rang, and it was, of course, the news.

"D'you understand now why I had all Alfred's pictures taken down, and why I never want to see any of them again?"

She got up and rang the bell, and I got up, too, and we shook hands . . .

The butler led me along the hall and into the studio. He switched on the lights. All down both sides there were framed pictures, stacked against the walls, and on the end wall was *The Castle of Dreams*.

It was precisely as the old lady had described it to me, except for one important detail.

There wasn't, and there never had been—I know because I went over every square inch of it with a magnifying-glass—any figure in a long black cloak, just about to mount the painted stairs.

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GOOD PRINCIPLE

A woman's face is her fortune only when it draws interest.

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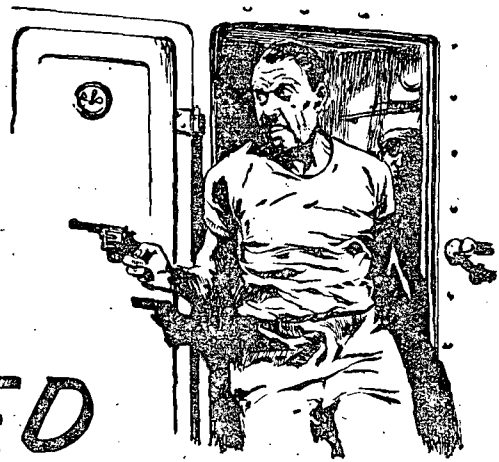

WEED

BY BERKELY MATHER

I DIDN'T feel like talking to anybody. This was due partly to the fact that there wasn't anybody there to talk to, and partly to the mouthful of oily cotton waste they had stuffed down my gullet and fixed in position with a strip of adhesive plaster over my kisser. All I was doing at that moment was wondering dully how the hell I came to land myself in this spot.

You're probably wondering the same, so let's get back to the start-line.

Geth Straker, Canadian master mariner, ex-wartime navy, now owner and skipper of a fifty-foot Diesel launch that was once a fast patrol boat. I am two hundred pounds of solid beef topped, according to Perry, with seven pounds of equally solid concrete.

Perry is my wife. I've described her to you before, but if you can take it I'll do so again. She is small, but not too small. She has the clean, smooth lines of a Bermudan racing sloop. She has hair like the glow of the Red Sea sun after it has been below the western horizon for half an hour and the brassiness has had time to go out of it, leaving only the warmth. Her eyes are like the sea, too—but about a thousand miles farther north and sixteen hours earlier, or in other words the Mediterranean blue-green at dawn.

I don't apologise for the sea analogy, because the sea and Perry are the two most beautiful things I know, and both are equally unpredictable, and that's the way I think of them, together.

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A new Geth Straker adventure . . .

The sea can be serene and restful and can make you feel you never want to leave it. So can Perry. The sea can raise Cain and make you want to get the hell out of it. So can Perry. But the sea always wins in the end. So does Perry.

And that's how it was now. She had raised Cain. Not just a little Cain, that one could take as a sort of relish to life like mustard with beef, but real Stromboli-Cain.

She's half Russian, quarter Hungarian, and the other quarter would defy a professor of eugenics. She's had no education worth a damn except at the hands of Sergei, her father, but she speaks half a dozen languages perfectly—and can cuss in half a dozen more, also perfectly. I tried to stop her doing something she wanted to do, and she used the whole dozen on me.

We'd been back a month from Alpecchi Reach where she'd had a going over by some guys who didn't like her father's politics, but with her usual rubber-ball ebullience she was now as chipper as a squirrel, and the marks had all but gone from her face. I had insisted on her resting and stayed ashore to see that she did.

Sergei had gone his way, and for that I was glad and relieved. I like him, sure, but I didn't like his business, and the thought of his dragging Perry back into it used to throw me into a lather.

We were happy in that funny little dump of a flat in Alpasi. It had no plumbing, and we cooked on a stove which even Casey wouldn't have had aboard the *Peregrine*, and we bathed in a cut-down oil drum—but the view from the living-room window alone was worth two hundred bucks a month. If your eyes had been strong enough you could have seen Venice one way, and five hundred miles clear down the Adriatic the other.

Money was short, of course, but that was chronic with me in these new, strange, honest days when smuggling and gun-running were out. But Perry was the best manager in the world, and the meals she could knock up on a busted exchequer would have made many a top-flight chef green with envy.

The *Peregrine* had cost me a bit. She had developed trouble in her starboard engine that called for a major overhaul; and then, damn me, if I didn't buckle her plates coming over the harbour bar at low tide, and that took her into dry-dock for a month. I was cleaned out and I was in the red at the bank, too.

The afternoon it all started, I had been down to the waterfront to see a guy about a charter fishing trip, but it had been no dice. I had given Casey, who lived aboard, the last few lire I had to stop his ribs sticking through his hide. I didn't mind owing Casey his hire when I *had* it—but it was different when I didn't know where the next cent was coming from.

I'd told him he had better start looking for a job until things got a bit better, but he had only grunted something rude. That was all right, but even Casey couldn't live on loyalty alone.

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I saw Perry as I was crossing the Fra Alfonico Square. She was just getting into a big open car outside the Bonifacio Hotel. A guy was helping her in, and I didn't like the way he was doing it. The cobbles were dry, so there was no need for him to spread his coat for her to walk on. He did everything short of that—hat held clutched to his beefy bosom, deep bow, her hand clasped in his, little finger cocked like an old maid eating a chocolate éclair, passionate glance, muttered compliment—the whole treatment.

There were three others in the car. Minor diplomats from some banana republic doing Europe on Embassy funds.

I started forward to see what was cooking, but before I reached them they were off in a cloud of dust and perfumed hair oil, leaving me flatfooted in the middle of the square like Otis J. Muttonhead.

I gloomed off back to the *Peregrine*, went on board, and took out a bottle of Beirut arrack and gave myself a large snort.

There are two sorts of arrack. The superior kind tastes like varnish, and acts on your innards like sulphuric acid. The kind Casey drinks costs half as much, tastes like varnish remover, and feels like red-hot horseshoe nails when it passes your tonsils.

This bottle belonged to Casey. He used it to take verdigris off brasswork, and only drank it when he was broke. He was broke now, so he joined me and we had another. It didn't do me the least bit of good—only made me feel mean.

Now don't get me wrong. I hadn't the slightest doubt in the world about Perry *that* way, but she has been mixed up with her old man in all sorts of secret agent rackets which I know just enough about to dislike. She had sworn off it when she married me six months earlier, but she'd just been drawn back into it willy-nilly, and it was only by the luck of Old Nick and a coat of paint that I'd got her out of it with a more or less whole hide. She didn't know anybody in this place I didn't know, so the first thing that struck me was that she was doing another job for Sergei.

I went back to the flat then, and found that Perry was there ahead of me; and she had big Adriatic prawns and a young chicken fried in butter with mushrooms and served with pilmeni—the old Russian version of ravioli, only better. There was a bottle of Vino di Rondi to go with it.

She looked up through the steam of the little kitchen and grinned.

"What were you doing in that car with those wops?" I asked.

Now if there's anything in this world that Perry hates it's the use of slang terms for people's races. That, and the tone I used, and I suppose the way I looked at her, needled her from the start.

"Mind your own damn business," she flashed. "Go and clean some of that tar off your face, and stop trying to look like the husband of the woman taken in adultery."

"I'm not trying to look like anybody," I said, "but I want an answer."

She turned back to her cooking. "It will be ready in ten minutes," she said, and added, "the dinner I mean."

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Blame the arrack. I stepped forward and grabbed her by the arm and shook her.

"Answer me," I shouted. "Answer me!"

She looked at me in silence for a moment, then said very quietly, "Let go my arm, Geth."

But the devil was in me. I shook her again—hard. She pulled away. She looks small and soft, but underneath it all is steel and whipcord. If only she had grabbed the skillet and crowned me, I'd have snapped out of it, and perhaps she'd have laughed.

She didn't laugh, however. She just looked angry and maybe a bit hurt and bewildered, and if I'd been anything but a half-drunk, sorry-for-myself knucklehead I'd have taken her in my arms, and that would have been the end of it.

As it was, I swung away from her, my outflung arm caught that damned rickety stove, and over went what should have been the best dinner south of Venice. That part of it was accidental, I swear, but it must have looked otherwise to Perry.

I'll never forget her face. She just looked at me as I stood there among the steaming wreckage—and because I was a man bereft of dignity and reason, and because those niggling little doubts I had were now clamorous and established facts, I yelled something unprintable at her, then I turned and stalked out.

I walked a block and half away towards the waterfront before I got a grip on myself, and when I did the shock of it all hit me like a bucket of cold salt water. *I* had said that to *Perry*—not a whisky-crazed, longshore stiff to his doxy. I sat down on the edge of a fountain because I hadn't at that moment the guts to turn round and walk back to the flat and apologise.

Time passed, flies buzzed, bambinos tried to put the bite on me for cigarettes, and a mongrel dog sniffed round my ankles. Finally sanity returned. I got up and went back.

She'd been quick.

Her small suitcase had gone and the other two were packed, and she'd left a forwarding address in Marienkerke on the Belgian coast. It was, I knew, an accommodation address of Sergei's that meant precisely nothing. He had lots of them, but actually lived at home.

There's a small airline that makes two flights a day out of Alpasi up to Venice. I wasted ten minutes on the phone in the hall trying to get some sense out of the clerk at the airport. His English matched my Italian, and we got nowhere fast.

I hotfooted it to the station then, just in time to see the Milan express pull out.

I thought of the Bonifacio, but drew a blank there, so I went to every other one of the hotels. She had gone all right.

Ever tried walking around without feet or legs or belly? Without anything but a big consuming ache of emptiness? Well, if you have you'll know how I felt—if you haven't, it's not any use my trying to tell you about it. Anyhow, that's what I did all night. I

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could face neither the empty flat nor the no doubt by this time full Casey.

Came the dawn, as they used to say in the old silent movies, and I found myself sitting in an all-night waterfront café wondering what in hell I was going to do now, and knowing that, even if I could make up my mind, I was hamstrung before I started by the fact that I hadn't a sou in the world. I could, of course, write to Sergei care of his forwarding address, eat crow, and try to enlist his aid, but that would take time, and Casey and I had to eat meanwhile. I could also put the *Peregrine* up for disposal, but I knew that the difference between what I got for a forced sale, and what she was in hock for wouldn't take me far—and that would also mean putting Casey on the beach.

About ten o'clock I gloomed off back to the boat; and when I reached her I wished I hadn't, because Capernoni was there talking to Casey.

It was Capernoni, the dockyard boss that I was in hock to. I raised a sudden interest in a statue of Garibaldi just outside the dock gate, and veered off starboard to have a closer look at it. It was no good because he had seen me already, and I heard his footsteps hurrying over the cobblestones behind me. I turned and faced him. "Lay off, Capernoni," I begged. "I'm not feeling so hot this morning. You'll get your dough, only I've got to have a bit of time."

He beamed at me. "Dough? Who talka about dough? That all right, boy. I don't worry."

That was something, anyhow. He'd been needling me only the day before.

He grabbed me by the arm and suggested a drink. Something clicked then, because Capernoni is that rare thing—a mean Italian.

"Some other time," I told him. "I'm busy now."

He winked and dug me in the ribs in high good humour. "Not too busy for this, boy," he said. "Job—very good job—plenty dough—yes, indeed, by damn."

I pricked up my ears a bit at this, but warning bells were ringing. He had offered me jobs before, the sort that were now on the forbidden list. I'd promised Perry I was off anything even slightly snide for life—but then she had promised me in turn that she'd never work with Sergei again. It looked as if her end of the contract had gone up in smoke—and I was broke.

I followed him across to the café by the gate, and as I did so I saw Casey looking anxious and miserable over by the *Peregrine*, but I pretended not to.

Capernoni ordered two vinos and started a spiel about how hard times were, and how the dockyard wasn't paying its way any more, how his creditors were running him ragged, and how some boat-owners still wouldn't pay their bills.

I stuck ten minutes of it and then blew up noisily, and Lucci, who owned the joint, came over and said, apologetically but firmly, that if I couldn't argue quietly like a signor, would I

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please go, as I was disturbing his other customers. That to *me*—Geth Straker, skipper and owner. I tell you, being broke is like carrying a leper's bell in the old days.

I went back to the *Peregrine*, and Capernoni yelled after me something in Italian about it being all right to be snooty if you've got the chips, but not so hot when you're in hock, and how would I like it if he grabbed my boat? Ordinarily I'd have gone back and taken him apart for that, but as it was I just wanted to get aboard and out of sight down in the bilges somewhere.

Things were still grim that evening when Bina, the old doll who cleaned the flat, brought the laundry down. She also brought a parcel, neatly but loosely wrapped in tissue paper, which she said had been left for the signora by the good sisters of St. Rita's, where they did the so bella needlework, and that there was four thousand lire to pay—and she had paid it. They were grimmer then, because I didn't have the four thousand lire.

Bina wanted to know where Perry was and I stalled, but I couldn't get rid of her. She grinned and smirked and then she wanted to know why we hadn't told her so she could have done some needlework, too. When I asked her what the hell she was talking about, she coyly opened the parcel and showed me.

You've guessed it. Small pants about the size of my palm, dresses ditto, pink-and-blue woollen thingummies . . .

So *that* was why she'd blown her top! Could you blame her—after what I'd called her? And could you imagine how I felt?

Why in hell hadn't she *told* me? Well, there was only one thing for it now. I had to find her—and find her quick. And when I found her, I had to get down on my hands and knees.

As sometimes happens when the heat is really turned on, after the initial panic I started to think clearly. Sergei! He was the only link. But it might be weeks before the letter caught up with him.

There was one other possible way. By accident I had heard him give an address to Perry just before he left us after our return from Alpecchi Reach. He handed her some travellers' cheques, and asked her to send the money on in notes as he didn't want to cash them himself in Venice.

" Send it to Herr Felix Ganz at Calli della Stampalia—number seventy, my dear," he had said. " That will find me."

Some things stick. That address had, although it had gone to the back of my mind at the time and only now emerged. He might not be there now—but there might be somebody who knew where he was.

There was even a chance that Perry was there herself. The thing was to get up there fast.

The one guy I could possibly make a touch from was Capernoni—and I had antagonised him. Capernoni had his Achilles heel, though; just that very thing—dough. The *Peregrine*, as she lay, was worth all of ten thousand pounds. Halve that for a forced sale: five thousand. Suppose I offered him a note for a thousand

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on top of the three I owed him already, at ten per cent for one month? If I didn't pay up the boat would be his. That would be the sort of deal that Capernoni couldn't resist.

The dockyard would be closed now, and I didn't know where Capernoni lived, but I remembered that there was an old night-watchman there who could probably tell me. I washed in a bucket of water and shaved and changed into clean gear.

Casey, who knew that there was something wrong, was sitting alone in the foc'sle like Orphan Annie. He had cooked me some chow earlier in the day, but I had bawled him out when he came into the cabin with it, and now he was sulking.

I felt a heel at the thought of what I was going to do to him now. The *Peregrine* was the only home he knew, and Perry and me his only friends, family, and world. I muttered something about going to see Capernoni to raise some dough, and got out quick . . .

It was dark when I got to the small dockyard, but the watchman had a light going in the hut at the entrance. He was a bit deaf. It was one hell of a job getting him to understand what I wanted.

Capernoni's house was a small blank-walled place that faced inwards to a courtyard. There were no windows fronting on to the street at all, but I could see through a chink in the high wooden gate that there was a light in a room across the courtyard, so I hammered and hollered in an effort to make someone hear. But Capernoni, if he was in, seemed to be as deaf as his watchman. I gave it up and tried to think of a better way.

This was a deserted part of the port, all the other buildings in the lane being olive oil or dried fish warehouses. It was the sort of dump a jerk like Capernoni *would* live in.

I was in such a state by this time that the thought of going back to the boat, and sweating it out till morning without seeing him, was out of the question. The gate didn't seem too tough to climb, so I took a run at it, heaved myself up, and clambered over.

I began to have my doubts when I dropped down the other side. Capernoni couldn't be at home, and he must have left the light to discourage possible moochers in his absence. I crossed the dusty courtyard to the dimly-lit window and peered in through the half-drawn curtain. Still not a sign of life.

I tried the door then and found that it swung back easily off the latch. I sat down on a busted chair just inside and lit a cigarette.

I waited until three separate quarter-hours had sounded from a cracked bell in a nearby church tower, and then gave it up as a bad job. Capernoni was evidently making a night of it somewhere.

I climbed back the way I had come, and dropped into the alley right at the feet of a gent who was in a clinch with his girlfriend. He didn't like it.

I apologised as best I could, but he insisted on making something of it. He grabbed the front of my shirt, shoved his puss in mine, and started bawling me out in heaps.

He had every right to be sore, but I just couldn't take any more that day, so I put my hand in his face and pushed hard.

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He went over backwards into the open drain that ran down the middle of the alley, and the girl, thinking no doubt that I was about to start in where he had left off, and prizing her virtue above rubies, started to bring the roof down. What would you have done? Yes—I did, too. I took it on the lam—fast.

It was only a quarter-hour walk back to the *Peregrine*, but it seemed like ten miles, and I was just about all in. I crawled to the cabin, and dropped on the bunk without even taking my shoes off. I was asleep before my head had touched the pillow.

Even Casey said the Maresciallo was a nice old guy for a cop. He used to come aboard sometimes and shoot the bull with Casey, and often he brought Perry vegetables out of his garden.

He wasn't shooting the bull now, though, and he didn't seem to have any vegetables with him. He was leaning over the bunk and he was shaking me. Looking past him I could see other carabinieri standing just inside the cabin door.

Casey was there, too, using bad language to them all impartially. "You dumb-clucking litter of macaroni-chewing love-children," he was yelling, "I'm telling you, ain't I? The skipper hasn't been off this damn boat all night."

"What goes on?" I asked, sitting up.

"Capitano Geth Straker?" inquired the Maresciallo.

"That's me," I answered, "you know that already."

"I have to ask again," he said, deadpan. "I also have to ask you to accompany me to the polizia—the police-station."

"What for?" I asked.

"You will please come without trouble, Capitano."

"Not until you tell me what for."

He sighed. "You make it hard for me and for yourself. Come, please, or my men will have to—er—assist."

I swung my legs out of the bunk, and Casey, bristling like a terrier and growling in the back of his throat, ranged round alongside me.

"No cookie 'assists' *me* off my own ship, Maresciallo," I told him. "Take a peek at that flag topsides—that's if Casey has remembered to run it up."

"There are certain offences where the flag does not protect, Capitano," he said. He paused for a moment or so, and then added, "It is sufficient that a man has been found dead, and I think you may be able to help our inquiries."

"But who is he?"

"Who but Capernoni?"

That *did* get a reaction from me. I nearly went through the deckhead.

"But, damn it, I saw him yesterday—" I began.

"So I am given to understand," he said dryly. "I believe there was the slight—er—altercation about some money, and a threat to seize this boat."

"But you're not suggesting that I—"

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"I suggest nothing, Capitano, but you see the seriousness of the matter now. You will come, please."

I saw all right. I went.

Alpasi is a sleepy little place, as addicted to crime, apart from smuggling, as the average Cornish fishing village.

I had time to think during that short walk to the polizia in between the Maresciallo and one of his carabinieri. Capernoni was as unpopular as any man in town, holding, as he did, half the populace in hock for boat repairs. You'd have thought, however, from the silent—almost threatening—mien of the crowd, that I'd already been tried and convicted for murdering the town's chief benefactor. I was darned glad when we arrived and the door was closed behind us.

The Maresciallo was all cop now—quiet, efficient, and coldly courteous, with just a touch of triumph barely concealed beneath it all. For an ageing dick firmly planted in the drunk and minor-smuggling belt this was big stuff and, criminologically speaking, Alpasi was now on the map. He sat down behind the desk and motioned me to take the other chair; then he started to shuffle through papers and make preliminary notes. It was the normal police routine of letting the client sweat it out a bit first.

Finally he sat back, regarded me with a this-is-going-to-hurt-you-more-than-it-is-me expression, and said, "You were the enemy of Signor Capernoni, no?"

"Who said?" I asked.

"He was about to seize your boat?"

"He was not."

"Then why did he say he was?"

"*I* didn't know he said so. It's boloney, anyhow."

"Boloney?"

"Skip it, Maresciallo," I said. "Suppose you tell me what you think you've got on me, eh?"

"I think I've got the murder of Signor Capernoni on you, my friend," he answered.

"Merely because we had a mild argument in a café?"

"That, and other things. You went to his house last night, no?"

"Sure, but only on a matter of business."

"Do you usually find it necessary to climb walls when you talk business? There are witnesses to that. I think I make a very good case of this matter. Now I charge you. Our law is the same as yours. You don't have to say anything now but if you do I write it down and give to the pretore—that is the examining magistrate, you understand?"

Sure I understood. I was being pinched for murder.

He motioned to the waiting carabinieri and they closed in on me.

"Maresciallo," I begged, "wait, you are making a mistake; I can explain—"

I told him I wanted to see my consul. He said, sure—tomorrow, if they could get him down from Chioggia, *after* I had been before the pretore.

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I beefed about a lawyer then. That would be fixed, too—*after* I'd seen the consul. Lawyers had to be paid, and I was a person of no visible means, unless I could prove otherwise. I couldn't, so there we were back at the beginning.

They weren't a bad crowd. They brought me some chow twice during the day, and let me keep my smokes and matches. The cell was quite bare except for a plank bed, straw mattress, and a couple of blankets. It was one of two in a single-storied wing next to the Maresciallo's office, and it abutted on to the stone wall that enclosed the compound. The door was good and solid, and the one small window was high up in the wall and barred.

It must have been hell for the occupant in the rainy season, because the tiles in the roof looked as if they hadn't been fixed in years. I could see the sky through the chinks in them as I lay on my back all through the long afternoon. No, they certainly didn't look as if they'd keep the weather out—nor, for that matter, a determined guy in.

I studied the roof very carefully while there was light enough left. I didn't know just how close a watch they were going to keep on me at night, but from my previous slight acquaintance of them they were a pretty happy-go-lucky crowd . . .

It was dead easy when it came to the actual flit. The roof was well within reach when I stood on the bed, and the tiles just lifted out. I waited until about eleven o'clock, and then humped up the blankets into a rough semblance of a sleeping man, just in case

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somebody looked through the peephole before morning. Then I moved six tiles and hauled myself through, and even took the time to replace them afterwards.

I clambered up the stone wall and dropped into the alley the other side—first taking darned good care there were no necking couples underneath. I said, probably unfairly, that the Italian police were a bit slow off the mark, but it was dead certain that once they discovered I had slipped my cable they would be after me like a swarm of hornets.

I tried putting myself in their place. Where would they look for me first? Quite obviously on the *Peregrine*. That wouldn't take them long. They'd probably sling Casey off her and put her under guard— That gave me an idea.

Suppose I got Casey to take her off somewhere, and hide her up. It would certainly be a red herring. But where? You can't hide a fifty-foot boat just like that.

Wait a minute, though—Alpecchi Reach! Up that inlet where the dunes ran into a low cliff, and the spinifex grass overhung the water. The place where Sergei and I had got Perry and Casey back from those comrades.

If Casey could warp her well inshore, she'd be safe, even from aerial observation, for some days at least. They'd get round to it in the end, of course, but by that time I should have contacted Sergei and made my peace, even vicariously, with Perry. I'd turn myself in then, and trust to luck and the fact I was innocent.

I lit out for the waterfront and gumshoed along to the *Peregrine*'s berth. To my relief Casey was aboard. I was certain of that while I was still fifty yards away, because he was sleeping on deck and snoring like the Pendleton Round Up at feeding time. I slipped aboard and grabbed both his wrists tight. It was advisable to do that when you woke Casey suddenly. He sat right up in full blasphemous wakefulness.

"Geth! For Gorsake!" he yelled when he saw who it was. "At's my boy." He chuckled approvingly. "The calaboose hasn't been built yet that'd—"

"Listen," I told him, "I've got to get up to Venice. It's my only chance of seeing Perry—"

"O.K., what are we waiting for! Let's get started up." He heaved himself to his feet.

"Use that cork fender you call a head," I snapped. "How far do you think I'd get in this boat?"

He scratched his chin. "I suppose you've something there," he said. "How are we going, then?"

"I'm going alone," I told him.

"Yeah, but how?"

"Oh, hitch a lift—I haven't figured it out yet," I answered, "but in the meantime I want you to warp the boat out quietly and get down to Alpecchi Reach. Shove her up that inlet where those guys had their boat, and lie low. The police will naturally start searching for her. That should give me a bit of time—"

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"I get your meaning," he said doubtfully, "but I don't like the idea of you on the run on your lonesome with the whole Eye-tie police force on your tail."

"Can't say I'm stuck on it much myself," I said. "But that's the way it's got to be. Now, for Pete's sake, get her started up, keep her throttled down to the limit until you're clear of the breakwater, and then give her all she's got. I reckon that you've till daylight—six hours. I'm going to change into my shore-going duds. They'll have a description of these."

He went off to the engine-room and I dived for the cabin. I needed a shave badly and, jumpy though I was, I took time off to have one. I changed at the double into my one decent suit, and shoved my razor, comb, and a toothbrush into my pocket; then, as an afterthought, I added a pair of sun-glasses that were lying around. I topped the lot with a panama hat with a college-boy bandanna on it and hoped that the net result was a tourist.

Casey came into the cabin as I was finishing. "Better take this," he said, holding out a roll of notes.

I'd previously given him five thousand lire, about four English pounds, and from the smell of his breath he'd spent it, but the roll he was flashing now was wrapped in a thousand-lire bill. I knew Casey's financial holdings better than he did himself. Apart from that five thousand they had been at zero. I grabbed the roll and counted it. There were nine other thousands nestling coyly under the top one. He looked abashed.

"Where did you get this?" I demanded.

"I was in a poker game this evening," he mumbled.

"You're a liar, Casey," I told him. "The locals don't play poker—not that sort of poker, anyway. Come on—where'd you get it? You been selling gear off the boat?"

"You know damn well I haven't," he flashed. "Perry gave it to me months ago, after that time we were broke in Brindisi. She made me promise to keep it so it wouldn't happen again, but I wasn't to tell you."

Ever wanted to crawl under a stone? I did then. I took five thousand and handed him back the rest. He must have known how I felt because he didn't argue.

"O.K.," I said, "you'd better get under way. There's eighty gallons on board, but you'll have to do some fishing for eats."

"That's been taken care of, too," he told me stiffly.

"I'm sorry, Casey," I said. "Put it down to me being kind of frazzled."

"Forget it. How long do I stay down there?"

"Make it two days—if you haven't been picked up before then. Just come back and tell them you've been out fishing on your own, and say, quite truthfully, that I haven't been with you. They'll grill you some."

"I can take care of that. Cops is the same no matter where they come from."

I nearly added, "And so are heels," but Casey, being Casey,

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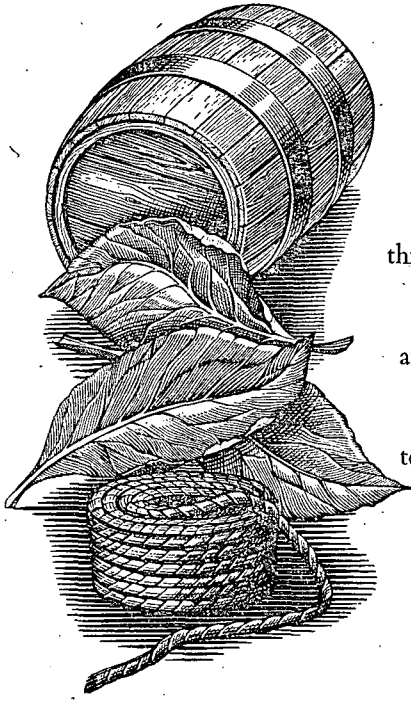

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wasn't holding it against me. I went up the cabin steps and took a good look round. The town was as dead as a doornail.

"So long, Casey," I said. "Sorry I can't tell you more about things. I don't know anything myself. I've just got to find Perry. When I have, I'll get in touch with you. Until then, play it off the cuff as it comes."

We shook hands, which was rare between us, and then, feeling more lonely than I'd ever felt in my life before, I went up the gangplank to the quay.

I turned and made to cross the waterfront—and then nearly jumped clean out of my skin.

This goon must have been standing in the shadows right alongside me all the time.

"Good evening, Captain Straker," he said in English. "I don't suppose you've got a gun, but would you mind raising your arms while we check?"

I did mind, but it's no good arguing when there's a short-nosed .38 pointed at your belly. My navel must be gun-prone—someone is always aiming at it.

I felt hands frisking me from behind, and realised that he wasn't kidding when he said, "we." I couldn't see either of them properly in the dark, although that gun was evident enough.

What the hell was going on? I asked the question aloud, in exactly those words.

"Just keep it buttoned up, will you, Straker?" said the first guy, and the second, who was also wearing ironmongery prominently, prodded me in the back again. We went on in silence as far as the Versoni jetty and then, detouring round the watchman's shack, we went down the steps to the boat landing.

There was a dinghy moored here, with a third man in it. They elbowed me aboard, pushed me down into the sternsheets, and kept me covered with their artillery. The third man shoved off and pulled with strong, silent strokes for the top end of the small harbour.

There was a large white motor yacht anchored in the basin and I knew instinctively that we were making for her, as there was nothing else up that end that we couldn't have reached quicker by walking. My guess proved right—about the only thing that had that day—and we glided up alongside the accommodation ladder. The thug nearest to me prodded me in the ribs with his gun again and motioned me to start climbing.

For a split moment I toyed with the idea of jumping into the drink and swimming for it, but I discarded it almost immediately. They would either have caught me in a matter of seconds, or just beaned me with a boat stretcher and let me sink—and even if I had managed to make the beach I would have been no better off. I sighed and stumped up the ladder.

They hustled me across the deck and into a doorway abaft the wheelhouse. It was pitch black inside, and it stayed that way

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until the others had crowded in after me, and then someone shut the door and switched on the light.

The cabin was small but luxuriously furnished and appointed. This ship was not large, but she was evidently some millionaire's pampered darling. There was a blue carpet underfoot that came up to the ankles, or so it seemed. The bulkheads were panelled in cream-coloured wood and gilded moulding and on three sides there were enormous overstuffed divans.

There was also a man there. His clothes matched the furnishings even if his face didn't. He was a long, rangy sonofagun and he lolled back on the divan opposite the door. He was dark, lantern-jawed, and with a mean expression that was partly due to the fact that his eyes were so close together they almost seemed to be looking into each other, and partly to a slice that someone had evidently taken out of the starboard side of his mug some time. It had healed badly and pulled up the corner of his mouth into something between a snarl, a lopsided grin, and a sneer.

His whole appearance, in fact, matched everything else I had run up against that day. It was lousy, and I felt very depressed.

He said, "Where is it, Straker?"

I said, "Where's what?" And then several things happened at once.

One of the apes behind me hit me hard on the side of the neck with the edge of his hand, another kicked me in the back of the knees, and a third put his weight behind his foot and the foot into my ribs as I went down. The blue carpet looked a lot better than it tasted. I rolled over on my side and then sat up quickly in order to get my face above the arc of the boot that I saw out of the corner of my eye.

The gent on the divan said, "Hold it. Perhaps Mr. Straker would like at this stage to save himself some grief. Stand up, Straker, and let's have a look at you."

I struggled to my feet and blinked hard while the cabin swam back into focus. The thug who had chopped me on the side of the neck knew his business.

"I'll settle for the easy way," I told him, "but you've got to tell me what it's all about."

I felt the goons behind me tensing for another combined assault and I hunched my muscles like a dhobi's donkey.

Squint-eyes flashed them a signal to lay off. He said, "You know damn well what I'm talking about. The cargo of brandy that you ran for Capernoni."

"Are you sure you're dealing with the right guy?" I asked him. "I only ever ran one cargo for Capernoni—and that was months ago."

"That's the one," he said. "Where is it?"

"How the hell do I know—?" I began, and the same earthquake as before happened, only this time it was worse.

I decided I'd had enough of it, and I went into action. The action only lasted about fifteen seconds, but in that time I managed

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to land one fair in the middle of the puss of the chopping gent. Nose and teeth squelched satisfactorily into a messy mélange and he landed on one of the divans and started to muss up the pretty upholstery, but by this time my own face was renewing acquaintance with the carpet, and I could feel the cold ring of a gun muzzle being screwed into my right temple.

I lay still. Very still.

Squint-eyes said in a tired voice, "What's the percentage, Straker? That will happen each time you give a dumb answer."

I got to my feet again and the thugs behind me had the forethought to pull my hands behind my back and strap them tightly.

"Call your apes off," I said, "and ask me what the hell you want. If I can answer I will. Capernoni means nothing to me."

"Where did Capernoni stow that stuff?" he asked.

"I don't know—and that's the truth," I answered. "My part of it ended when I delivered it to him here."

"You've had dealings with him since," he said.

"Sure," I agreed, "my boat's in hock to him for repairs but I haven't carried anything for him other than that cargo. He tried to proposition me a couple of days ago, but I turned it down."

"Why?"

"Because I'm out of the rackets now."

"What made you change your mind?"

"About the rackets? My wife didn't like it. That's not a smart alec answer—it happens to be the truth."

"Cut out the Chinaman's talk, Straker," he said. "You know what I mean. That night you went to see him."

"I went to see him to raise some more dough," I began, but at that moment there was a tap on the door. Someone switched off the lights, and I heard another man come into the cabin behind me. The lights went on again.

The newcomer was dressed in yachting deckhand's clothes—striped matelot's shirt and sailcloth trousers. He started to say something but Squint-eyes shot him a look, so he crossed over to him and whispered.

Squint-eyes looked annoyed, and thought for a moment or so.

"O.K., Straker," he said. "You're still lying. I'm going to stick you down in the bilges for a bit. Think it over. I want the whole truth when I see you again. If you're sensible and decide to tell me something that agrees with what I happen to know already, I'll set you ashore somewhere on the Yugoslav side. If you're *not* sensible I'll drop you over the rail with a couple of weights tied to your feet. It's as simple as that."

The guys behind dived on me again. One of them filled my mouth with cotton waste, and another clapped a strip of adhesive plaster over my kisser, ungently. They dragged me across the cabin—through a door beside the fireplace and down an alleyway. We went through another door into the engine-room, across a slippery grating, down a ladder, and over to the starboard side of the twin-banked Diesels.

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One of my escorts yanked up a steel plate and disclosed a dark and nasty-looking hole over the ballast tanks. They shoved me down into it. One of them kicked me on the side of the head as I slid through, and then they dropped back the plate with a clang.

I lay flat on my back on top of the ballast tank. Except for a minute chink of light round the edge of the plate above me it was pitch black. The place stank of fuel oil and stale bilge water. I wondered if there were rats down here, and decided that if there were I would prefer to be sitting up if they started to explore. I sat up and cracked my head on the deckhead. I lay down again.

What *was* this crazy set-up? That booze cargo had been valuable, but not all that valuable.

One point seemed to stick out, though. Those barrels had contained something more than just brandy and, whatever it was, Squint-eyes was desperately anxious to get his hands on it.

My cue was, therefore, to pretend that I *did* know something.

The top of that bilge tank was curved, and a row of sharp-headed rivets ran down the middle of it. An Indian yogi's bed would have been a feather mattress compared with it, but the air was foul, and I'd been missing a lot of sleep one way and another, so I must have dozed off . . . I woke as the plate above me was raised and a light shone on my face.

Two of the goons looked down on me without affection. They grabbed me by the arms and hauled me out, clouting my head on the edge of the hole in the process.

Squint-eyes was sitting in the same place. The lights were still on, but I noticed that there was an edge of brightness to the curtains that covered the portholes, and guessed that some hours had gone by. One of the goons dragged off the adhesive plaster and a couple of inches of skin.

Squint-eyes said, "What about it, Straker?"

"What do you want to know?" I asked. "These apes of yours have been hazing me so much, I can't think straight."

"You don't have to think," he said. "Just tell me where the stuff is."

His eyes swivelled—they bored into me.

"I know where the stuff *was*," I said slowly, "but I've no guarantee that it's there still. Capernoni might have shifted it."

He said, "Forget it, Straker, unless you want the boys to give you another massage. The stuff is where *you* put it when you gypped Capernoni out of it."

I looked as startled as my battered pan would let me. "How do you know that?" I asked. "I mean, what makes you think I gypped Capernoni out of it?"

"What the hell has it got to do with you how I know?" he snarled. "I *do* know, that's all. When Capernoni got around to telling me that last night he wasn't lying."

"So it was you who rubbed him out?" I said quickly.

"You're running me pretty short of patience, Straker," he said,

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" but if it will make you answer quicker—sure it was me. That weed belonged to me; Capernoni was only the agent. I thought he was pulling a fast one when he said you'd swiped it, but he wasn't. He wasn't pulling anything. All that gink wanted was to stay alive."

So there it was. I now knew who had bumped Capernoni off, but one heck of a lot of use that was to me. Like Capernoni, all I wanted to do at the moment was to stay alive.

I also knew what was in the phoney brandy cargo. Weed is another name for hemp drugs—marijuana, hashish, bhang. There was supposed to be nearly five tons of booze. If only a proportion of it was weed I could quite understand Squint-eyes' anxiety to get it back. If anybody had asked me to make a snap guess at the value of that cargo as brandy, I'd have settled for eight to twelve thousand pounds. I didn't deal in drugs, but I knew that weight for weight it was worth maybe two hundred times more than brandy.

Squint-eyes said, " For the last time, Straker, are you talking, or does Sammy start in on the soles of your feet with a blowlamp? "

" I can't tell you where it is," I said.

Squint-eyes signed to the guys behind me. They started to pile in like the willing workers they were.

" I can take you to it," I yelled when I managed to get my mouth clear of that damned carpet again. They let me get up.

" It's down at Alpecchi Reach," I mumbled. " Call these apes off and I'll tell you."

I don't know why I said Alpecchi Reach. It just happened to be the first place that came into my head.

" Whereabouts down there? " he snarled.

" About a mile from the top end of the lagoon—buried in the dunes among the spinifex grass—three hundred yards in from high-water mark." It's wonderful how exact you can get once you start lying, particularly when you've got your hands tied, and two enthusiasts are spoiling to get to work on you.

Squint-eyes looked hard at me for a full minute.

" Sticking to that, Straker? " he asked at last.

I nodded. Talking was becoming painful.

" O.K.," he said slowly, " this'll keep you alive just as long as it takes us to get down there. If the stuff's there you might even *stay* alive, and I might still put you ashore on the other side like I said. If it isn't—" He shrugged.

He didn't need to say any more. I got his meaning fine. He went on, " I'm going to shove you down below again. The cops have been aboard looking for you. They're searching all boats in harbour. Maybe they might come again."

I said, " If you stick me in those bilges in a seaway I'll roll off the tank and croak."

" That would grieve me," he said nastily.

" Maybe," I answered, " but it wouldn't get you anywhere. You'll never find the stuff on your own."

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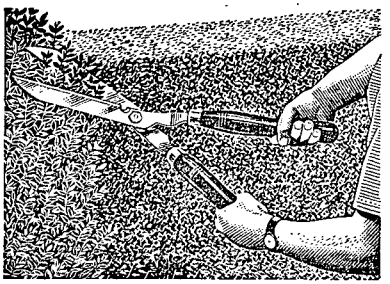

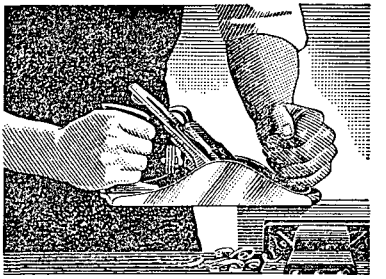

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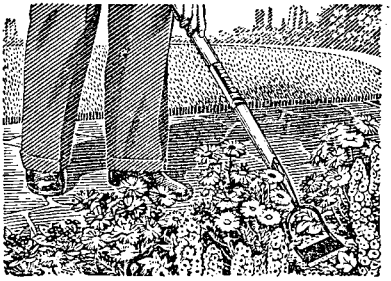

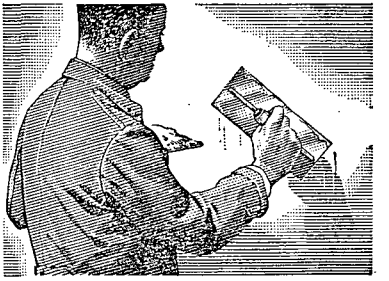

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He said something to the goons in Italian—Italian not much better than my own—and they dragged me away again. What I said to him must have made sense, because this time they didn't put me down in the bilges but in a small paint and oil locker just abaft the engine-room.

There was a small salt-encrusted porthole in the locker. I got up painfully and dragged myself across to it. The yacht was pitching crazily right into the eye of a stiff south-easterly half-gale. Through the porthole I could just make out Bonifacio Head on our beam. Since this was the starboard side that meant we were running south.

If he had taken me at my word, we were on our way to Alpecchi Reach, and from this position and against this headwind and sea we had a good ten-hour run before us. Plenty of time to think—if only I knew what to think about.

My wrists were beginning to swell badly, and the belt they had tied them with was biting into the flesh. I started to wriggle them just to get the circulation going, and I found that there appeared to be a little play in the bonds that had certainly not been there before. I wriggled them some more, and realised that the belt was a cheap plastic one and that the heat of my wrists had caused it to soften. I tottered over to a drum of oil and sat down and got to work on the belt with a will.

In half an hour I had loosened it sufficiently to pull one hand free, which cheered me up considerably. A nice handy spanner on the bench under the porthole caught my eye. I picked it up and slipped it into my side pocket where its comfortable bulk made me feel even happier.

The paint locker was about eight foot square, and its door opened forrad into the engine-room which was some five feet lower in level. The wooden bulkhead had warped badly so the door didn't fit, and there was a wide chink round it that gave me an unobstructed view of the engine-room except for the near corners.

However lush things were topsides, they certainly weren't as shipshape down here as Casey kept them on the *Peregrine*. The twin Diesels were running smoothly enough, but nobody was watching them. Once under way in my own boat, Casey became a fixture in the engine-room. Here they just seemed to start them up, and thereafter run them from the remote controls in the wheelhouse.

I was getting pretty hungry and thirsty by this time, and I started to wonder what their usual arrangements might be for feeding unwilling passengers. I could have saved myself the trouble; they didn't appear to have any. I sat on my tail right through that livelong day, with just an occasional slant through the porthole to check our position. The half-gale certainly slowed us down, because it was well after dark when we fetched up at the Alpecchi lagoon. I felt the engines slacken to half speed as we slid into quieter water, and then someone came down into the engine-

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room and across the plates to the door of the locker. The door opened, and I saw Squint-eyes standing there. I goggled up at him, and contrived to look even dopier than I felt.

He said, "End of the line, Straker. Where is it?"

"Halfway down the lagoon," I answered. "There's a reef sticking out from the shore. It's inland from there a bit—"

"Skip it," he said. "There's nothing we can do about it tonight. We'll go ashore at first light."

I hoped my face hadn't betrayed the leap my heart gave. If they were going to anchor for the night I had a chance. I dissembled and looked sick. "How about a drink and some chow?" I asked, and injected a whine into it.

"Soon as we dig those barrels up, Straker," he said. "There's no point in feeding a guy if you're going to knock him off right after—and that's what's going to happen if the stuff isn't there."

He went then, slamming the door after him, and later the engines stopped and I heard the anchor being let go up forrad.

I lay in the darkness and sweated it out for a good three hours. The boat was dead silent, and I guessed that all hands must have been pretty tuckered out after that dusting down the coast.

Eventually I got up and took a good look through the crack of the door. The engine-room was pitch dark except for a dim electric bulb over the control panel of the forward bulkhead.

I fumbled around the locker until I found a file, and slipped it through the crack in the door, waggling it up and down until I came to the catch. It slipped back and in a matter of minutes I was free.

Outside the locker was a catwalk with a short ladder leading down to the deck. At the end of the catwalk there was another ladder which led upward into the gloom. This cheered me considerably, because from the layout of the boat I reckoned it must lead to a hatch out on to the afterdeck. This would save me the risky necessity of going along the alleyway through which I had made my involuntary entrance.

I climbed the ladder and came up against a scuttle which had been battened down against the weather. It was fitted with big wing-nuts, however, and it didn't take me long to get it open. The cold night air that flooded down on me was like a draught of wine after that locker. I shoved my head out and tried to get my bearings.

The wind had dropped a little but there was still some sting in it, and even here in the lagoon the water had a short, vicious chop to it. There was a lot of cloud and I couldn't make out a single star. I've described elsewhere how barren the coast is along the Reach. There wasn't a flicker of light anywhere on the shore.

The lagoon, I knew, varied in width from one to two miles, but just whereabouts we were in it I hadn't a clue. I didn't, in fact, know quite in which direction the shore lay except that, since we were pointed up into the wind at the end of our cable and since the wind was coming from the south, it must be somewhere

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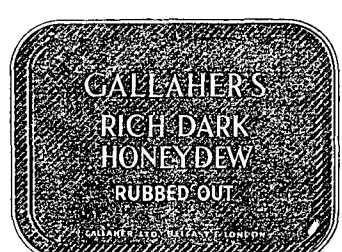

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vaguely on our starboard beam. There was always the chance, though, that the wind had shifted a few points. All in all it was not a night for a long swim.

I gloomed over things for a time and then drew myself out on the deck. I took off my shoes and padded round in the pitch darkness. All hatches seemed to be fastened down, and there wasn't a chink of light showing from anywhere below or out of any of the superstructure scuttles, and there was certainly no deck watch that I could see—at least, not until I ran into the guy just abaft the wheelhouse.

He was sheltering from the wind behind a low combing that ran thwartships across the superstructure, and I nearly stumbled over him. He yawned, stretched, belched garlic at me, and said something in Italian, taking me for another crew member.

I grunted something unintelligible, and pointed forward into the gloom. I was just able to make out his head as he turned to follow my finger, but that was quite sufficient. I bounced that spanner, and he folded up quietly at the knees. I caught him before he hit the deck, lugged him clear of the combing, and laid him down gently in the scuppers.

I had no means of telling in the dark, but I hoped it was one of the apes who had been manhandling me.

I continued my snoop round the deck without further shocks to my nervous system until I had explored every inch of it. There were two small boats aboard: the dinghy they'd shanghai'd me into, and a bigger launch. Neither was the slightest use to me as they were hoisted inboard and lashed down, and I'd have made too much noise if I'd tried to manoeuvre them over the side.

I thought of battening down all hatches from the outside and so cooping them in, but gave that up as unworkable as I was pretty certain there was a companionway into the wheelhouse, and the wheelhouse was locked from the inside. That meant they could come up from below and plug me through the windows. If only I had a gun myself . . . I pulled up in mid gloom and suddenly thought of the watchkeeper I had beaned. I went forrad hoping hard.

He was still slumbering gently where I had put him. I frisked him thoroughly and could have howled with joy when I found a 7 mm. Biretta tucked snugly under his left armpit. I eased the jacket back and checked that it had a full magazine.

The dawn was just starting to pale the eastern horizon by this time. I hadn't the ghost of a notion where I was going from here, but quite obviously the first thing was to get them battened down below decks. There were, as I have already said, three separate exits: a hatchway on the foredeck that evidently led down to the crew space, a companionway in the after well that came up from the cabins, and the engine-room hatch through which I had emerged. There was also, of course, the inside stairway that came up into the wheelhouse, and over which I had no control.

I crept round silently and fastened the first three, observing in

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passing that the goon I had clipped was stirring slightly. I unreeved a hunk of signal halliard, triced him up quickly but securely so that he looked like a Norfolk turkey ready for the oven, then gagged him with his own woollen cap.

I was sorry I hadn't an oven, but I did the best I could with a nice wet uncomfortable space between the two lashed-down boats. Then I went back and looked regretfully at the locked wheelhouse door.

If only I could have broken in there and secured the hatch at the head of the inner stairway, I would have had them completely bottled up. There was only one way they could get at me, and that was through the wheelhouse. If I could command that, they were powerless. So was I, which made it stalemate—but stalemate was better than being in check. The thing now was to find a spot where I could watch the wheelhouse but be out of their field of fire.

It was in searching round for the best place that I stumbled over the life-raft on the cabin roof. It was one of those small, naval-surplus things that has an emergency ration pack sealed into it, together with a water container. The ration pack had long since been pinched, but the water was still there, for which I was thankful. I took a long drink, carried the remainder right up forrad into the nose of the yacht, and got down behind the anchor capstan. Flat on my belly, its solid steel bulk gave me adequate protection and a complete field of fire over the foredeck along to and including the wheelhouse.

I settled down and waited. As the paleness in the east lightened still further, I peered out along the coast. Casey was somewhere over there—snugged down and out of sight. If only I had some way of getting in touch with him. . .

I must have been there an hour before things started to move. The first sign was a tantalising whiff of coffee coming up a fluepipe somewhere amidships, and carried on the wind to my oversensitised nostrils. I slavered like a starving wolf. Somebody came up into the wheelhouse then, unlocked the door, and stepped out on the deck.

It was the gent who had been so handy with the chopping edge of his palm. I had figured this one out already. I aimed at his legs, but the light was still tricky. The bullet took him higher up. He spun round and fell backwards over the doorsill.

Somebody who had followed him up yanked him back into the wheelhouse.

My battered face cracked into what might have been called a smile of beatific contentment tinged with malice. One up to Straker. The first.

The ship woke then like a prodded hornets' nest. I heard wild hammering at the secured hatchways, and blasphemy in four languages came up through the ventilators. Some of the less ready thinkers dashed up into the wheelhouse, which was stupid

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of them. My next two shots shattered the glass of the steering window, so they went down again quickly.

There was silence then, and I guessed they were in a huddle down below. I hadn't long to wait.

Squint-eyes' voice came up through the ventilator in front of me. "Where will this get you, Straker?" he asked.

"You tell me," I invited.

"You can't stay up on that fo'csle head for ever," he said. "There are five of us down here."

"Is that counting the gent I've knocked off already?" I asked.

"You haven't knocked anybody off," he snarled.

"I'm referring to the ape who was sleeping up on deck when he should have been on watch," I answered.

I had the satisfaction of hearing somebody say, "He's rubbed Blascovitz out," in tones of mild surprise.

"There's still enough of us to settle with *you*, Straker."

"Come up and settle, then," I suggested. "You lead the way."

He treated that one with the contempt it deserved, and merely called me some rude names, automatically and in the manner of one whose mind was on other things. I could hear them buzzing together like bees, and then Squint-eyes called out again.

"You've got Blascovitz' gun—"

"He didn't mind my borrowing it," I kidded. "Last I saw of him he couldn't have cared less."

"It's a Biretta and it holds eight," he went on. "You've fired three—"

"One clipped a hoodlum's ass, and then there were five," I sang, nursery-rhyme-wise.

"You've only got—" he started again.

"Five little bullets, nestling in the pan, Stick your head out, Squint-eyes, and you'll finish in the can." Childish stuff, but it made him very angry. The filth he bawled at me this time was no longer automatic. He put his heart into it.

They went away from the ventilator then, and shortly afterwards the savoury smell of bacon and trimmings came up through the scuttle. I found it hard to bear.

About an hour later I saw the cap of one of the goons move past the shattered window just inside the wheelhouse, and I almost fell for the corny gag. It was obviously held on the end of a stick, and they were trying to get me to blind off the rest of my five rounds. I didn't rise to it.

Another hour went by and then they brought a submachine-gun up, poked it through the window, and cut loose with a whole magazine, but the goon who was firing it was taking no chances. He kept well below the steel deckhead, with the result that he was firing high, and the bullets sang by like angry wasps a good ten feet above me, one of them snicking a wire forestay that ran up to the stumpy mast. Squint-eyes called out to me after that, but I played possum and didn't answer. Then they tried the hat trick again, without result.

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There's always a mug in these cases. This time it was a vacant-eyed type who had giggled foolishly as he kicked me the night before. He was built like a tank, and had evidently been included in the party strictly for his muscles.

He came tiptoeing out of the shelter of the wheelhouse like an elephant treading on eggs. He was slack-jawed and drooling with fear, and I could see the big .45 automatic in his hand shaking like a leaf.

Behind him I could hear urgent whispers needling him on. He couldn't see me behind the capstan, and if he was capable of any thought process at all he was no doubt hoping that the sub-machine-gun had rubbed me out and that I'd gone over the side. Goon or no goon, I didn't like doing it, but I knew what he and his pals would do to me if they got their paws on me again—and if I needed any further stiffening of purpose, I remembered what they had done already. I let him come on five gingerly steps, then I shot him in the belly.

He looked vaguely surprised, and his gun clattered down on the deck-plates. He took a step backwards and, as his knees buckled, I slid out, grabbed the gun, and was back behind the capstan before the rest of them in the wheelhouse could take a shot at me. The big man recovered slightly and took another tottering step towards me, and I thought with a real feeling of revulsion that I should have to shoot again. That step was, however, his last. He stiffened and reeled and the back of his knees caught the low taffrail. He went over the side with a splash.

The long day dragged slowly to a close. The wind had backed round to the north now, and it was getting cold. I had about a pint of water left, but my belly was an aching void. It certainly looked as if I was in for a beastly night.

As darkness finally fell, somebody had a brainwave. The searchlight on top of the wheelhouse leapt into life and, guided by remote control, swung down until its blinding beam took in the capstan. I saw their idea—when I was dazzled by the beam they could rush me from out of the surrounding darkness. They weren't quick enough, though. I took a carefully aimed shot straight up the beam, and the light went out amid a tinkle of glass.

"O.K., clever guy," yelled Squint-eyes, "we can still wait."

I had now been lying behind the capstan for some fourteen hours, and my limbs were stiff and aching. I decided therefore to move about a little, but realising that if anybody was watching from the wheelhouse I would be silhouetted against the night sky if I stood up, I slid carefully into the scuppers, and inched down amidships on my belly. It was as well that I did, because just as I passed the cabin superstructure I heard a faint whirring sound from the after hatchway.

I tiptoed over.

The sound was continuous. At first I thought it came from the dynamos, but as I watched I saw, dimly in the darkness, a line of

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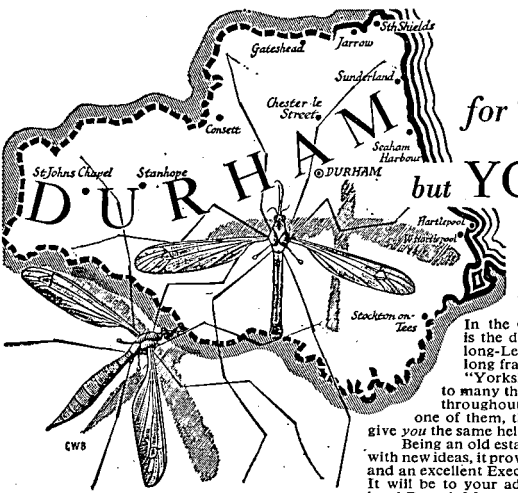

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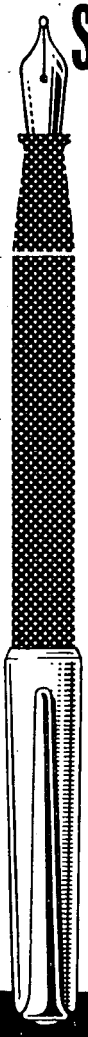

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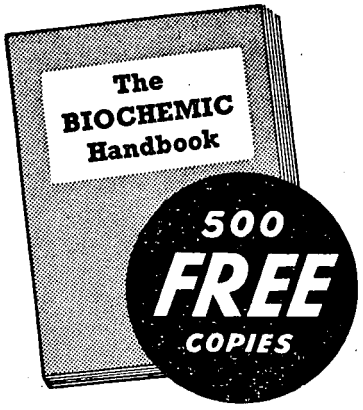

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tiny holes alongside the hatch fastening and through them came pinpoints of light. I saw then what was happening. They were steadily boring through the thick teak with a power-drill. Once the catch was cut out they could sneak through this hatchway and gain the top of the wheelhouse. From up there they could pick me off behind the capstan. I realised that the drilling must have been going on all the afternoon.

I put one bullet through the heavy woodwork right alongside the holes. It was enough. There was a shriek from the other side, and the drilling stopped. I ran back to my place behind the capstan before they got the idea of cutting off my retreat from the wheelhouse. At least they knew I wasn't asleep, and I was pretty certain that no other enthusiast would have a go at drilling.

Soon I was assailed again by the smell of food from the galley scuttle. I tried to treat it with dignity, hunching myself against the freshening northerly wind. If only I could get ashore and make contact with Casey. This wind was setting right now, but could I make it in my battered and weakened condition?

Wind setting right? I sat with a jerk. The boat was bucking at the end of her paid-out cable. If she drifted as she was pointing her stern, she would eventually ground on the end of the sand spit that jutted out a mile above the cove to which I had sent Casey. If she did that I was within easy distance of the shore. But how to get the anchor up without their hearing me? The capstan was, of course, a powered one, but it had hand gear as well—though even that would clank like the devil. You couldn't wind in eight fathoms of heavy chain without . . . I sat up. What a chump I was!

Eight fathoms—how did I know that? Why, because with my sailor's eye I had noticed that afternoon, without particular interest, the shackle and the daub of red lead just by the hawse hole that marks the eight fathom mark—the shackle that can be unscrewed in an emergency when there is no time to weigh anchor.

My fingers found it in the darkness. The damn thing was rusted almost solid, and I had no marline spike to stick in the eye of the pin to get purchase, but there was a bit of wire securing the spare handle of the capstan. I unwound it and made a loop in the eye of the pin, then inserted the barrel of the Biretta and twisted. The pin moved a little, and in a short time I had it unscrewed.

I dropped the unshackled end of the cable into the water and felt immediately the easier motion of the boat as she drifted free. I hoped the others wouldn't notice it, too.

There was, of course, no way of judging her speed and direction in this pitch darkness without any shore lights to get a bearing on, but she was moving and, since from time to time I could see the Pole star through the scudding clouds, I knew her general drift was to the south. All I could do now was to wait and hope.

Around midnight I heard above the wind a slight noise from the wheelhouse. I fired directly at it. There was a startled yelp and a burst of Italian swearing.

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Nobody was going to sit *there* watching me.

It must have been about two hours later that I heard the sound of breakers on sand and, straining my eyes through the darkness, I made out a line of white directly abeam of us, which puzzled me slightly until I realised that we had swung broadside-on to the line of drift. The noise was getting louder every minute and I sensed that we were drifting quickly. At this rate we would touch soon and, lousy sailors or not, they were going to wake up fast. I whipped off my jacket, wrapped the pistols in it, tied the lot to my head with my belt and slipped over the side.

The water felt icy, and there was more of a chop to it than I had thought from the level of the deck, but at least I knew where I was going, and even if I had had any doubts, my feet touched bottom after no more than two dozen strokes. I waded through the surf and up to the dunes. I could barely make out the ghostly white bulk of the boat just beyond the surf line, and I realised that without a searchlight they would be unable to see me at that distance, so there was no need for concealment.

I put on my jacket and set off at a smart clip along the dunes. I knew the Reach and I knew where Casey would have hidden the *Peregrine*, but finding the spot in the dark was one hell of a job. And then, when I did find it, she wasn't there.

I had drunk my remaining water before leaving the boat. I wasn't thirsty and my hunger had now passed to a dull ache that wasn't particularly noticeable unless I laughed—and I wasn't laughing. But the need for sleep was upon me to an unbearable degree. I figured dully that I was about two miles from the boat and that there were an awful lot of dunes to be searched between me and them if they came looking for me, so I risked it. I just rolled up under a clump of spinifex and passed out.

It was almost light when I woke and it wasn't the chirping of the reed warblers that did it, either. I was light-headed, that's all. I could smell coffee and bacon and hear someone singing—if it could be called singing.

My name it is Bill Williams,
And my age is twenty-three,
I drive a longshore tanker for the goddamned companee,
Like every Bluenose skipper
I like my likker clear,
I'm a rootin' tootin' wrangler and a sonofabitch for beer.

The tune wasn't so hot either. In fact only Casey could murder time, rhythm, and pitch like that.

I lay in the sand trying to get my stiffened limbs to work again and wishing that the alleged singing would stop, but it didn't, and I started to get worried. I sat up and groaned. I wasn't only hearing things—I was seeing them.

Down at the water's edge Casey was hauling in on a handline, and even as I watched he pulled a large whitefish up on the sand.

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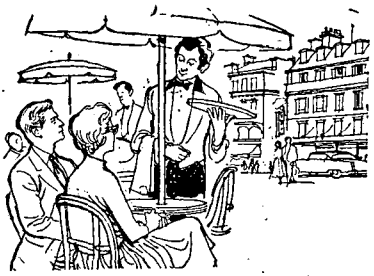

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In the hope that my voice would dispel the illusion I said, "Pipe down, Casey—I can't take any more."

He dropped the whitefish and spun round slack-jawed, then said something unprintable and dashed towards me.

"Geth, Geth!" he yelled, and by the time he had reached me, swung my not inconsiderable bulk off my feet, and pummelled me in the ribs, I knew he was real. I was very relieved.

"Where's the boat, you bum?" I asked when I'd got my breath back.

"There," he said, and pointed.

I suppose I must have been pretty muzzy when I reached the spot in the dark—and after all I *had* told him to hide her up. He had certainly done a good job on her, and must have worked fast. He had warped her in under the shelving bank and then just cut spinifex grass and neoni bush and piled it on deck and along the rails so that it hung down to the waterline. From shore and sea and certainly from the air, she was invisible.

"And where's that chow cooking?" I asked next.

"In the galley—where else?" he answered, and led the way.

He was bursting to hear what had happened since he had seen me last, but he had enough sense to grab a frying-pan and start cooking some more when he saw what was happening to the current lot. I ate solidly for half an hour and then sat back and told him.

"Hm," he grunted at last. "Thought I heard some firing in the distance yesterday afternoon, but I put it down to my ears playing me tricks. O.K., what now?"

"First of all we get the radio warmed up while I call Alpasi."

"The cops?" he asked, slightly shocked.

"Nothing else," I said.

"You know what you're doing," he shrugged. "Suppose I go up to the top of the rise to see what them bimbos are doing?" He went out clucking dolefully. He hated cops.

It took me nearly half an hour to raise the guardacosta and then we had language difficulties, but at last I managed to get over to them my name and where I was. That brought results in the shape of a torrent of Italian that was beyond me.

Casey came back then, grinning broadly.

"They're hard aground," he said, "but the dimwits don't know it. Not a sign of life, and both boats still in the chocks."

"O.K.," I said, "let's get this haystack outboard and start up."

"What're we going to do?" he asked.

"Get shovelling, Casey," I told him. "No time to tell you now."

I still had the submachine-gun aboard, so I got it out and unwrapped it from its oily coverings, then I loaded three pans and took the lot to the after well. There's a little cubbyhole there, a relic from the *Peregrine*'s wartime days, it's built of steel and the machine-gun slit is still in the bulkhead. There are also steel sheets that are normally kept down below, but which fit into grooves in the wheelhouse and so give the helmsman cover.

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When Casey got the camouflage clear I had everything shipped and ready. We started up, and backed out into the lagoon.

It must have been the noise of our engines that woke them; I saw them clustering in the wheelhouse as we closed in. I switched on the loud hailer and gave them specific instructions.

"We're bulletproof, Squint," I called. "That wheelhouse of yours isn't. Get your heads down—I'm going to shoot."

I gave a raking burst as we passed, and another as we came about and throttled down. The woodwork round the wheelhouse splintered and flew. "All right," I called. "Just so as we all know. If any of you monkeys go near those controls I'll blast you for keeps. The coastguards are on their way down."

There was silence for a time and then *their* loud hailer crackled into life. "How about a deal, Straker?" came Squint-eyes' voice —and it had a bleat in it. "Fifty-fifty on the weed, and I'll do the marketing. Lay it on the line for you, a quarter of a million bucks. What do you say?"

Bit pathetic, wasn't it? But as I said, they were triers.

It was a long wait—nearly six hours—during which time we lay at anchor within comfortable range. Twice they tried to get started up from down below and to run her off into deep water, but since nobody showed any inclination to go to the wheel it didn't help them any.

The lean, grey, coastguard launch came in at last, and we were buried under a load of carabinieri and plain clothes dicks—and so were they. It took a lot of explaining and the dicks were only half convinced by the time we got under way and set off in convoy for Alpasi. Those Italian police have their methods, though, and the wounded guy on the other boat was a natural squealer. By the time we had fetched up he had sung the whole anthem—words and music—in order to save his hide.

There was not much more to it than that. They searched Capernoni's place thoroughly when we got in and found the weed under loads of ship's stores. He had swung it on Squint-eyes and blamed it on me. If a clincher was necessary, that was it. I had no means of finding out, of course, but I guessed that he knew these apes were on their way back to Alpasi for a reckoning, and he wanted to get me to load the stuff again to cover himself.

So that sewed up Squint and the three remaining goons. There is no death penalty in Italy, but the sentences they hand out don't err on the side of shortness. However, all that came later.

In the meantime I still had my own problem—an enceinte wife running around Europe somewhere, and Pop in the doghouse.

I went wearily back to the flat. I had to sleep before I started out on her trail.

I knew she was there before I got to the top landing, so opening the door and seeing her bending over the stove was in the nature of an anticlimax.

She glanced over her shoulder and said, "Fighting again?"

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I fingered my battered face and tried to get my throat muscles working. I wanted to say something, but I just couldn't find any darned words.

She said, "Go and clean up—but don't come near this stove. This is one meal I intend eating."

I gave up trying to talk then, and I just stumbled towards her; the next minute she was crying in my arms, and I was doing my damndest not to. I said, "Where have you been?"

Perry said, "At the Bonifacio, you mutt. A room went with the job, but naturally I never took it up."

This was crazy, but I played along. "What job?" I asked.

"I've been a courier for the last three weeks just to help out while things were a bit tough—but knowing how touchy you are I kept it dark. I'm sorry, Geth, I won't deceive you again—ever."

"But the baby," I mumbled. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"The baby?" she asked. "What baby?"

The small pants and thingummies were still where I had dumped them when Bina had brought them up. I pointed to them dumbly.

"Oh, those?" she said. "I ordered those for Senor Balenuzuelo—one of our Brazilian tourists—to take home to his married sister. Aren't they sweet? I get commission on them from the nuns, of course. Now go and clean up—and I promise I won't even ask what you've been doing to get your face mussed up. Not till tomorrow, anyway."

What can you do with a woman like that?

Don't tell me, I've tried it. It doesn't work.

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SOLUTIONS to GOOSEBERRY FOOL

on page 86

1. *Horse.*
2. *A size of paper* 35 *inches by* 22½ *inches.*
3. *i. Goethe; ii. Henry VIII; iii. Lord Chesterfield.*
4. *H.M. The Queen, in the Channel Islands.*
5. *Stamp Duty increases at* 100 *years.*
6. *Nupta, bride, and Maritus, bridegroom, in Latin.*
7. *The "silly season," when parliament is in recess.*

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD

on page 144

Across. 1, *Swashbucklers.* 10, *Relayed.* 11, *Perfume.* 12, *Awry.* 13, *Rifle.* 14, *Lief.* 17, *Immense.* 18, *Taranto.* 19, *Gastric.* 22, *Planets.* 24, *Oval.* 25, *Venus.* 26, *Gods.* 29, *Nettles.* 30, *Decline.* 31, *Infant prodigy.*

Down. 2, *Wolfram.* 3, *Says.* 4, *Bedside.* 5, *Capulet.* 6, *Lark.* 7, *Reunion.* 8, *Breaking point.* 9, *Self-possessed.* 15, *Snark.* 16, *Groat.* 20, *Spartan.* 21, *Cresset.* 22, *Plunder.* 23, *Eloping.* 27, *Elba.* 28, *Acid.*

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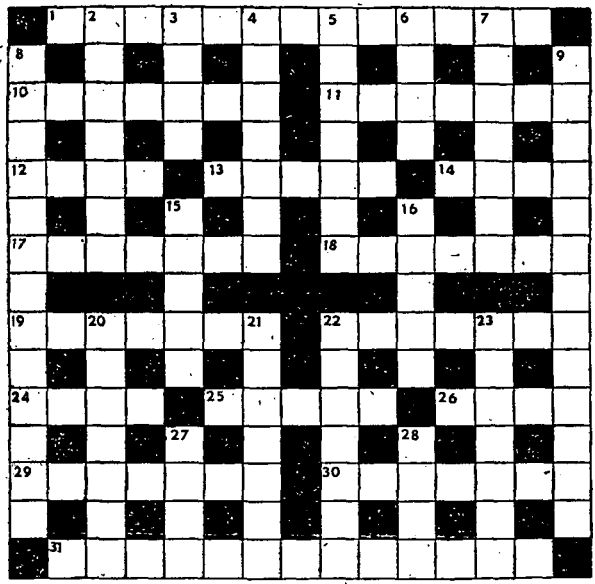
ARGOSY CROSS-WORD

★

Solution on Page 143



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CLUES

Across

1 Rusks clash web D'Artagnan types (13).

10 Broadcast like secondhand lino (7).

11 Won't sweeten Lady Macbeth (7).

12 Wrong, a worry, or omitted (4).

13 Ransack the gun (5).

14 It's an odd life (4).

17 I'm south-east after the men in a big way (7).

18 Port the sailor made for ? (7).

19 Part of Malaga, strictly (7).

22 Start scheme for heavenly bodies (7).

24 Athletic shape ? (4).

25 Queen of 22 (5).

26 Lars Porsena swore by nine (4).

29 Rash instigators ! (7).

30 Goes before a fall, according to Gibbon (7).

31 Quiz kid, maybe (6, 7).

Down

2 Two animals to one mineral (7).

3 "—— little, thinks less" (4).

4 As to the manner medical (7).

5 Juliet was Miss this (7).

6 Up with frolicsome bird (4).

7 Island for a get-together (7).

8 Longest wave-length? (8, 5).

9 Bedevilled by ego ? (4-9).

15 Ranks as a hunted creature (5).

16 Fourpence worth of oats ? (5).

20 Classic tough (7).

21 Fire-basket (7).

22 Place below booty (7).

23 En route for Gretna (7).

27 Able reformed, but not Baker (4).

28 Paradoxically sweet with drop (4).

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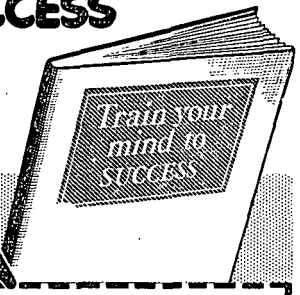

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